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DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND THE MORAL STANDING OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS

ANDREW I. COHEN

This essay explores whether dependent relationships might justify extending direct moral consideration to nonhuman animals. After setting out a formal conception of moral standing as relational, scalar, and unilateral, I consider whether and how an appeal to dependencies might be the basis for an animal's moral standing. If dependencies generate reasons for extending direct moral consideration, such reasons will admit of significant variations in scope and stringency.

I. INTRODUCTION

The environmental sciences show how denizens of the natural world are important for human beings. Might such dependent relationships have some normative implications for the moral status of nonhuman animals? Perhaps these relationships give human beings reason to treat some nonhuman animals as something more than mere resources.

We may have a reason to treat well the animals on whom we depend. If they have moral standing however, we would owe some treatment to them. In what follows, I set out a conception of moral standing as the status of an entity directly owed moral consideration. I explore the extent of any moral standing that might follow from an appeal to dependencies.
In focusing on the normative significance of dependencies, the essay makes several assumptions and sets certain controversies aside. I assume that all and only persons are moral agents and that only human beings are persons. I also suppose that personhood is not necessary for moral standing. Similarly, I pass over arguments that some animals might be persons (e.g., White 2007). The essay does not argue that appeals to dependencies are the only or even the best way to justify moral standing. Rather, I focus on arguments inspired by appeals to ecological and other relationships among persons and animals. I discuss whether and how such relationships alone might justify some moral standing for some animals. The general argument will mainly have a conditional form: if dependencies can root an animal’s moral standing, that standing’s scope will be constrained.

II. MORAL STANDING: THE FORMAL ACCOUNT

Beneficence, loyalty, protection, and justice are among the many moral considerations a person can extend to another being. There are three sorts of justifications for targeting a particular being with any moral consideration: (1) Even though the consideration is not owed to anyone or anything, there are some independent moral reasons for targeting the entity as the beneficiary of moral consideration; (2) The consideration is owed to some other party but the target of the consideration is merely a third-party beneficiary; (3) The consideration is owed to its intended target. It is this third sort of justification that interests me, since it picks out the status of moral standing.

A being with moral standing is not merely a beneficiary of moral consideration. To have moral standing is to be directly owed some moral consideration(s). Moral standing has three key features: it is relational, scalar, and unilateral. First, it is relational in that a being’s standing is a function of the considerations it is owed by others. An entity’s moral standing is always with respect to some other(s) who directly owe it moral consideration. If no entity owes some being X any moral consideration, then X has no moral standing.

Second, moral standing is scalar in that it comes in degrees. An entity’s moral standing can vary according to (1) how many other beings owe it some moral consideration, (2) how many considerations it is owed, and (3) the stringency of the considerations it is owed. Thinking only of the first parameter, suppose other matters equal that only Jack directly owes
X beneficence. By comparison suppose only Jill and Sam owe beneficence to Y. Y then has more moral standing than X does—more beings owe it direct moral consideration.  

Lastly, moral standing is unilateral. Suppose a person owes some moral considerations such as justice or beneficence to X. This alone says nothing about whether X in turn owes the same considerations to that person.

Drawing only on this formal account, to be morally considerable is simply to be a potential beneficiary of moral consideration. Being such a beneficiary does not presuppose that one has moral standing. The formal account is neutral on substantive issues such as who are the proper beneficiaries of moral consideration. The account is also neutral as to who has moral standing with respect to whom, at what stringency, and at what scope. The task here is not to explore competing accounts of moral standing or moral value. It is to determine whether dependent relationships among human beings and nonhuman animals can justify an animal’s moral standing.

III. INTERDEPENDENCIES AND INSTRUMENTALISM

By appealing to a link between human and environmental health, an environmental ethic privileging the interests of humans would easily produce moral reasons to be good stewards of animals. Such an “instrumentalist” ethic could say that our duties are exhausted by speaking of what we owe to each other or to ourselves. Many critics worry that such instrumentalism does little to arrest environmental degradation (e.g., Callicott 1992, 327; Light 1996, 278, 280–81; Passmore 1974). Instrumentalism may also seem inadequate to our moral experience (e.g., Callicott, 1989; Norton 1991, 3–13; Passmore 1974) and it may seem to confer a second-class moral status on animals (e.g., Leopold 1966, 228–29; Midgley 1995, 95–6; Nussbaum 2004, Sec. III). Many such critics seem to be troubled by a key implication of instrumentalism that suggests even the most enlightened stewards do not necessarily owe moral consideration to animals.

There are many noninstrumentalist approaches, but here I focus on one that might be inspired by the land ethic (Leopold 1966) and sympathetic variants. An argument of this sort appeals to the interrelationships among members of environmental communities as a way to justify animals’ moral standing (see, e.g., Goodin 1985, 179–81; Rolston 1985;
Taylor 1996, 1981). Aldo Leopold’s famous remarks are suggestive: “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (1966, 219). Leopold hoped we could expand the boundaries of community so as to include nonhumans. Each human being might then see herself as a “plain member and citizen” of the environmental community (Leopold 1966, 21–20). As one of Leopold’s more recent exponents, J. Baird Callicott (1999, 363–64) claims that ethical constraints track community boundaries. If people were better to appreciate their dependencies on animals and other parts of the natural world, they might develop a wider conception of community. With a broader sense of community we might cultivate an ethic in which some or all animals were directly due some moral consideration.

Any such argument for the moral standing of animals might seem too contingent and heavily conditioned to justify animals’ moral standing. Their moral standing seems only to come after persons adopt attitudes about the proper extent of community and the proper content of an environmental ethic. However, we should distinguish as much as possible between arguments for what it would take for people to treat animals as they ought from arguments for how people ought to treat animals. Let us take an appeal to dependencies as part of the second sort of argument.

What is at issue is not simply how people ought to behave. Consider the difference between maliciously breaking someone’s window and maliciously punching a person in the nose. Breaking the window is wrong, but it does not wrong the window. Breaking someone’s nose is also wrong, but it is more than that. It wrongs the person whose nose is broken. Moral standing helps to explain the difference. Moral standing captures how some entity deserves and is directly entitled to moral consideration.

The issue then is what people owe to animals in virtue of depending on them in some fashion. If animals were directly due moral consideration, mistreating them would wrong the animals themselves. An examination of the notion of dependency can shed light on why this is so.

IV. VARIETIES OF DEPENDENCY

Drawing on some (perhaps oversimplified) examples will illustrate the potential significance and challenges of appeals to dependencies. The relationships in which persons depend on animals are often interdependent but asymmetric. Many humans depend on certain sorts of earthworms
for helping to aerate and enrich soil, but the worms seem only to depend on humans for forbearing pesticide or herbicide use and, for some species, forbearing tillage (see, for instance, Werner 1990). Humans also depend heavily on many sorts of krill for their roles in food webs, and krill depend on humans for forbearing activities that adversely affect their numbers (see Nybakken & Bertness 2004; Hill et al 2006). Many humans depend on Holstein cattle for dairy products, and just about all Holsteins depend on humans for providing supportive environments in which they can live. Acknowledging that we depend on such animals might be the start of an argument for extending them direct moral consideration.

The examples are oversimplified because they conflate and gloss-over different sorts of dependencies. I mention three sorts, but my list is not intended to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive. This list is certainly not intended to address controversies about how best to describe ecological relationships (Schrader-Frechette 2003). For philosophical purposes, we might then first isolate project dependencies, which touch on how one animal may depend on another for a project it pursues (such as its survival). Humans depend on honeybees for honey production and, in the developed world, for the pollination of many nut, fruit, and cereal crops (e.g. Klein et al 2007). While humanity would probably survive without the honeybees, the sudden loss of honeybees would bring on the collapse of significant sectors of agriculture and impose hardships on many people. On the other side, the honeybees depend on human beings for protection from some diseases and predators and for a specific access to a reliable food supply.

Second there are identity dependencies. In many cases human choices have affected not just the structure of our relationships with animals but also the characters of the animals themselves. Domesticated and farm animals are obvious examples. Such animals would not exist—let alone be what they are—but for human contrivance. Indeed, some types of animals would not exist at all without prior human intervention.

These first two sorts of dependencies might be understood as different ways of replying to the question, for any given relationship: “dependent for what?” There is yet a third issue regarding the parties to the dependency relationship. Addressing this issue responds to the question, “Who is dependent on whom?” Here we specify which and whether types are depending on tokens, or vice versa, or some other combination. The de-
pendencies of human beings and other animals on types of zooplankton are cases where types depend on other types.

This admittedly brief survey of aspects of dependent relationships glimpses how complicated any complete analysis of a dependency would need to be. My task here is not to offer a complete analysis of dependency; instead, I explore how some appeal to dependencies might root the moral standing of some animal(s). Something about a relationship featuring human dependency on an animal(s) justifies extending that animal(s) direct moral consideration. Before considering the scope and stringency of such moral consideration, we should ask why any direct moral consideration might be appropriate at all in light of dependencies.

V. ARE DEPENDENCIES NORMATIVELY INERT?

Dependencies themselves might seem to be insufficient grounds for directly extending any moral consideration. (For a related discussion, see Passmore 1995, 140.) The problem lies with the supposed normative significance of any dependency or interdependency. That X depends on Y in some way (even vitally so) does not necessarily imply that X owes it to Y to extend Y some direct moral consideration.

Consider an example featuring a project dependency. “The man” in Jack London’s (1966) story “To Build a Fire” struggled to make a fire as his extremities went numb in the cold. The fire depended on his stewardship; his life depended on the fire. Does this interdependency have any normative consequence for whether the man owed anything to the fire?

Had the man regarded the fire with a greater or perhaps different kind of respect (such as involved in extending it direct moral consideration), he might have survived. He might have tended to it with greater care by guarding its fledgling leaps and sparks from the wind, all while feeding it more fuel in just the right way. Most importantly, he might have been better disposed to build the fire in just the right place and then improved his chances of survival.

If dependencies have any normative significance, it would seem they should do their work in the fire case. But a fire has no interests and so cannot be directly owed anything. Lacking interests there is nothing about it, or any inanimate object, to consider. (See related discussions by DeGrazia 1996; Feinberg 1974; Rowlands 1997, 245; Taylor 1981; and Cohen
Without further specification it may then seem dependency cannot be the only justification for moral standing.

We need not hold, however, dependency alone is sufficient for moral standing. A person might owe an entity moral consideration solely because of dependency, or she might owe the entity more because of dependency. In this latter way dependency might be sufficient for extending additional direct moral consideration to an entity whose direct moral considerability has been independently established.

Consider the first possibility: a person owes an entity direct moral consideration solely because of dependency, but now suppose that the entity’s candidacy for moral standing is independently established. Here we need not resolve what the independent criteria are for candidacy for moral standing. One possibility is that being an interest bearer makes someone a candidate for moral standing. If interests are not the correct basis for establishing candidacy for direct moral considerability, let us suppose some other criterion has done the trick. I propose focusing on animals to explore how far dependencies go in rooting moral standing.

I next consider some further limiting conditions on rooting any animal’s moral standing in an appeal to dependencies. I discuss what constrains the scope of an animal’s moral standing. Much will depend on our substantive moral theory.

VI. ON BASING MORAL STANDING SOLELY IN DEPENDENCY

Consider an example that challenges whether an animal’s moral standing can be justified solely by appeals to dependency. Alastair Norcross (2004, 232) imagines a hormone called “cocoamone” is an ingredient that makes chocolate dishes taste fabulous. Cocoamone only comes from the brains of freshly slaughtered puppies who have experienced a lifetime of agonizing torture.

Borrowing from Norcross, we can make a perverse appeal to dependencies in order to raise doubts about dependencies’ unassisted normative significance. Suppose the only way we depend on some puppies is for cocoamone. Whatever consideration we (or at least chocolate lovers) owed the puppies, it must at least permit their torture. What consideration could that be?

One possibility is that the puppies are simply owed forbearance from gratuitous torture. Torturing for making outstanding chocolate possible
would presumably not to be gratuitous in such circumstances. Another curious alternative is this: the chocolate lovers owe the puppies torture. Chocolate lovers’ dependency on the puppies for the hormone is after all the basis of the animals’ moral standing with respect to those chocolate lovers. We would then need to overcome the conceptual problem of owing torture to its intended “beneficiary.” If we overcame that barrier, the failure to torture would then somehow wrong its target.

Obviously the cocoamone example is intended as a reductio of appeals to dependency as the sole basis of moral standing. Suppose the project for which people depend on animals is pernicious. Dependency alone can then suffice for a moral standing that permits or requires pernicious moral regard or disregard.

One response might be to say that the cocoamone example points to a dependency of the wrong sort or is insufficiently attentive to other relevant dependencies. The puppies might then have a moral standing less accommodating of torture. For instance, an enlightened instrumentalism might hold that virtuous persons owe puppies forbearance from torture as a way of cultivating some virtuous other-regard. Alternatively we might appeal to some idealized conception of dependency. We then would not need to put so much stock in persons’ actual recognition of some dependency. Some other unacknowledged dependency that blocks torture may be awaiting discovery. Unfortunately it would not be much of a stretch to construct cases where some persons only depend on some puppies for cocoamone. Appealing to dependency alone can then root a moral standing that allows or even calls for torture.

If we were still reluctant to say that dependency alone can license a moral standing with such great moral opportunity costs, we might simply argue that suitably constrained dependency can root moral standing subject to certain cancelling conditions. The cocoamone example might show that dependency roots moral standing only if the project for which one depends on animals is permissible. An appeal to dependency alone is then at best an incomplete account of animals’ moral standing. I next consider whether dependencies might be sufficient for additional moral standing.
VII. AMPLIFYING MORAL STANDING WITH APPEALS TO DEPENDENCY

Return again to London’s story. A dog had accompanied the man. Surely, it would seem, the man owed something to the dog. But our view that he did seems not to be a function of dependencies but of something else about the dog, such as its sentience or its capacity for some rudimentary cognition. Perhaps, though, the man directly owed the dog some additional moral considerations because of his dependency on it. Had he treated the dog as having (more) moral standing with respect to him, he might have been better in a position to satisfy the reasons relevant to his case. He could have used the dog (dead or alive) to keep warm and saved his own life.

Such an argument for an animal’s moral standing seems to be an example of what Andrew Brennan and Y.S. Lo (2002) nicely describe as “cynical anthropocentrism, which says that we have a higher-level anthropocentric reason to be non-anthropocentric in our day-to-day thinking.” The cynicism is not the philosophical problem here. The problem is that an anthropocentric function for an environmental ethic might undermine an animal’s moral standing. Appeals to dependency seem to be clear examples of anthropocentrism. If dependency generates reasons, such reasons are instrumental to human concerns and consequently defeasible by weightier human concerns.

None of this is an objection to rooting moral standing in dependency. At best it is an objection to rooting all moral standing in dependency. The man’s dependency on the dog in London’s story was not necessarily the only basis of the dog’s moral standing with respect to him. Absent that dependency he may still have owed the dog some direct moral consideration.

We may still worry dependency is too weak a basis for any moral standing (even that in addition to any other): if dependency furnishes any reasons, they are not necessarily very stringent. There are two dimensions to this concern. The first concerns pretense at moral consideration. The second concerns the defeasibility of reasons to extend any direct moral consideration. I consider each in turn.
VIII. PRETENSE AND MORAL CONSIDERABILITY

Return once again to London’s story. Dependency on the dog seemed to give the man a reason to extend the dog additional moral consideration. But the man might have equally or better satisfied the reasons applicable to his case—especially his reason to stay alive—had he faked a sort of direct moral concern for the dog. He tried something like this, but the dog saw through the ruse. If he had been a better faker, perhaps he could have curled up with the dog long enough to regain sufficient feeling in his hands to strangle the dog and use its warm carcass to save his life. Faking the moral consideration the man owed the dog in virtue of dependency might be all the man had reason to do.12

The challenge thus seems to this: if dependencies give reasons to treat animals in a certain way, a person might satisfy all the reasons relevant to her case by withholding or pretending to extend direct moral consideration to any or all particular animals.13 Any moral standing compatible with such behavior might seem to be a sham. I argue this problem is neither serious nor unique to appeals to dependencies.

Suppose it is true for whatever reason that a person owes justice to a dog. The person would then be morally bound to the dog in certain ways, including being required to take the dog as a claimant on her conduct. Suppose for argument’s sake that justice forbids her from torturing the dog under any circumstances. “Pretending” to treat the dog as a claimant would satisfy the demands of justice because there is little to pretend in such a case. If she is currently not torturing the dog, then she is doing what justice requires. She cannot pretend to forbear torturing the dog. She could torture the dog while, say, pretending to make a soufflé. But here I assume she is not torturing the dog and so her behavior is consistent with the demands of justice. She owes the dog forbearance from torture. This moral consideration does not require that she sincerely believe that she owes it to the dog that she forbear torturing the dog. Her not having this belief (or believing something incompatible with it) seems consistent with all of the following three claims: (1) She owes the dog justice; (2) If she abstains from torturing the dog and performs (or abstains from) all actions justice requires of her with respect to the dog, then she satisfies the demands of justice; (3) If she tortures the dog, she does something morally wrong and she wrongs the dog. Ultimately, what a person believes might (depending upon our value theory) have little or nothing to do with the
truth-value of normative claims about what moral consideration(s) she owes an animal.14 Conceptually there is then no problem in supposing we can owe an animal some (other) moral consideration while not believing or disbelieving that we owe it that or any moral consideration.

This account of the (ir)relevance of belief to some moral standing is not unique to appeals to dependency. It applies just as well to arguments rooting moral standing in sentience or cognition. If their sentience were somehow the justification for owing pigs some direct moral consideration, then the pigs can have moral standing and the persons who owed the pigs direct moral consideration could do all that they needed to do even if they “faked it.” Dependency might, however, seem more tenuous a foundation for moral standing than likely alternatives. It may seem comparatively undemanding. Is the scope of moral standing generated by dependency too weak to count? It is to this issue I now turn.

IX. DEPENDENCY AND THE SCOPE OF MORAL STANDING

Any dependency on animals will be a function of human projects. If a dependency furnishes reasons for extending direct moral consideration, they might seem especially defeasible. The animals we depend upon are substitutable, and sometimes the dependencies themselves are substitutable. Jack might depend on his cow for milk, but he might just as well get it from another cow. Indeed, he might just substitute rice- or soy-based products and have no further need for the cow. Dependency would then seem to be an awfully fleeting foundation for reasons to extend an animal direct moral consideration.

This is not clearly a problem unique to dependency. It is a problem for any account that links moral standing to reasons. The problem comes from taking the existence of reasons for extending direct moral consideration as among the truth conditions of claims about the moral considerations directly owed to an animal.

Suppose “X” and “Y” are two entities and “C” is some moral consideration. If “X owes C to Y” is true if and only if X has a decisive reason directly to extend C to Y, then Y’s moral standing with respect to X hinges on the balance of reasons relevant to X’s case. If the balance of reasons relevant to X does not favor extending C to Y, then Y’s moral standing is in jeopardy.15

We can raise a parallel objection to any defense of moral standing
rooted in some morally enfranchising property such as sentience or cognition. Suppose pigs’ level of sentience is the source of their moral standing. Their sentience somehow gives some or all of us a reason to extend them direct moral consideration. Their moral standing might nevertheless be constrained by other moral reasons. Sentience might somehow imply, for instance, that pigs are usually owed forbearance from captivity. It might nevertheless be true that the pigs are not actually owed such forbearance if their organs (or perhaps even their meat) can save or enrich human lives. Of course many environmental ethicists build careers unpacking and debating such controversial claims, but the point is this: short of asserting (implausibly in my view) that something about an animal generates absolute and indefeasible reasons for everyone to extend it direct moral consideration under any circumstances, then the animal’s moral standing is constrained. This seems true of any foundation for the moral standing of animals. Even though the basis of an animal’s moral standing does not necessarily generate indefeasible reasons, the animal can still have moral standing in circumstances where persons do have decisive reasons to extend it direct moral consideration.16

On behalf of its rivals, dependency may seem to be a poorer foundation for moral standing because it is a relational quality. By contrast, sentience and cognition are intrinsic features of some animals. Since dependency is relational, then if the relation dissipates, any moral standing rooted in it would also dissipate. Such moral standing may then seem more vulnerable to defeat than one premised on intrinsic qualities. But this is no objection to the possibility of basing moral standing in dependency. It is merely a worry (though perhaps a serious one) that dependency is an anemic basis for moral standing. Note, though, that even if some nonrelational quality such as sentience were a (or the) basis of moral standing, it may still sometimes be permissible to withhold moral consideration from a sentient animal. Recent discussions of runaway trolleys, abortion, and emergencies suggest that sometimes any criterion of moral standing, no matter how robust, is vulnerable to defeat by weightier moral reasons (e.g. Kamm 2006, 1992; McMahan 2003).

What may ultimately doom dependency’s chances as a basis for moral standing is the variable scope of reasons it generates. Since it is a relational quality, dependency is rarely the same for all persons in all circumstances. The reasons dependencies generate can vary in stringency,
in different circumstances, and among different people. But consider an objection: if such reasons do not apply across the board, at the same stringency, and for everyone, then any moral standing such an account warrants is a sham.

This objection succeeds only when coupled with moral theories that hold moral standing must be invariant. There is no formal requirement about moral standing as such that an animal’s moral status generates the same reasons of the same stringency for all persons in all circumstances. Some theories defend or presuppose this requirement. One class of environmental ethical theories may insist that nonhuman animals have a moral standing only if such standing is the same with respect to all persons. Some writers might appeal to the notion of being a subject of a life (e.g. Regan 1983, 1981; Taylor, 1986, 1981) to show that all persons have a moral reason to extend some direct moral consideration to some or all nonhuman animals. Others may argue that sentience entitles a being to some direct moral consideration (e.g., Singer 1990), which may then seem to give all persons a reason to extend direct moral consideration to any sentient creature. A moral theory may say that some of an animal’s moral standing must be the same with respect to all persons, but it may yet allow for additional moral standing—rooted in dependency—that varies in stringency and scope. Whether dependency succeeds as a basis for at least some moral standing then hangs on the details of our moral theory.

X. OWING MORAL CONSIDERATION DIRECTLY TO GROUPS

Much of the discussion to this point has considered how dependency might give reasons to extend direct moral consideration to individual animals. Quite often, however, environmental ethicists speak of our dependency on groups of animals. If our dependency on animals is best described as a dependency on a type(s), what does this mean for any type’s moral standing? What does it mean for the standing of tokens of the relevant types?

How we answer such questions depends on whether and how collectives can be the proper objects of direct moral consideration. This is a familiar debate in environmental ethics and social philosophy. I do not need to resolve it here. Instead, I consider two salient views on the moral status of collectives and explore what those views mean for the moral standing of animals.
Suppose first that types are morally considerable. Borrowing from arguments about group rights (Kymlicka 1989, 1995), there are two possible meanings for a type’s having moral standing. Either the type as such has moral standing, or individuals have moral standing in virtue of being tokens of the relevant type. In either case, the scope of moral standing is open to significant variations. I discuss each possibility in turn below.

(1) The type as such has moral standing. Moral considerations are owed directly to the type. Failure to extend such moral considerations then wrongs the type. For example, we depend on earthworms to aerate the soil, so the argument might run, we owe some direct moral consideration to earthworm the type. Assuming we detailed the relevant consideration and how it is owed to a type, particular earthworms would then be beneficiaries of the moral consideration owed to their type. But the dependency that supposedly roots moral standing need not be relevant in the same way or at all for some persons (such as hunter-gatherers), and it might be much less significant for those who can find substitutes for the work earthworms do. Some people may then have little or no reason to show an animal type direct moral consideration purely in virtue of some dependency. On this account of the moral standing of types, moral standing would vary in scope and stringency.

(2) While a type as such would have no moral standing, individuals in the group would have moral standing in virtue of their being tokens of the relevant type. While this might give reasons to act in certain ways toward individual animals, each animal’s moral standing would then be readily defeasible. Suppose, for instance, some individual bat has moral standing in virtue of its being a token of some specific type of bat. That type of bat might be crucial for mosquito control in a given area. The token bat’s moral standing is still tenuous at best, since almost always any individual bat’s fate matters little to the success of a project of mosquito control. And such a project might matter little to persons in distant places who have no mosquito problem. Consequently, if types were sources of moral standing in this second sense, any moral standing justified through dependency would still be open to much variation.

We can make short work of the alternative, where types are not significant for moral consideration at all. For many of the same reasons cited above, the reasons generated by dependencies are readily defeasible—especially regarding what we might owe to some individual animal. Given
that many of the dependencies environmental ethicists cite are those on types, if the types are not significant for moral consideration, then dependency would be a tenuous basis for the moral standing of any individual animal.

XI. IDENTITY DEPENDENCIES

Much of the discussion so far has focused on varieties of dependencies humans have on animals for human projects. One remaining sort of dependency is more basic and concerns the very conditions of our identity as a species or as individuals. In many cases, human beings would not exist but for the presence or function of various sorts of animals. There is an obvious sense in which this is so—we need something to eat, and so did all of our ancestors. (We might argue that even vegans depend on the work of certain types of animals to make their food readily available.)

More basically, however, the existence of types of animals is among the existence conditions of human beings as a type and as tokens. There is evidence, for instance, that human intellectual evolution depended on early weaning, which itself depended upon the ready availability of animal protein—particularly for young children (Kennedy 2005).

Without belaboring the various ways such identity dependencies might manifest themselves, here we need only note that nothing of normative consequence seems to follow from such dependencies. Such dependencies might be backward-looking, in which case we could point to certain types of animals and say that humanity would surely have perished, or never evolved, or been more miserable, but for certain types. That might be an occasion for an appreciation of the contingency of evolutionary patterns, and perhaps even an occasion for some sort of gratitude. But such dependency is not obviously a reason at all for owing anything directly to the types in question—even if today there are still plenty of tokens of the relevant types. We might be grateful for dairy and beef cows, but that does not imply we have a reason to owe some gratitude to such cows. Quite often, the dependency in question is entirely substitutable. Any identity dependency might then be too indeterminate to give specific reasons to owe any animal (type or token) anything at all. Similarly, if the identity dependency on some animal is forward-looking (e.g. we do or will depend on some type of animal for us to be or remain who we are, considered as tokens or types), we might easily satisfy all the reasons relevant to
our cases without necessarily owing the relevant types of animals direct moral consideration. To the extent identity dependencies generate reasons to extend direct moral consideration of any sort, the scope of such reasons would seem to vary considerably depending upon the other reasons relevant to any given person’s case.

XII. CONCLUSION

Our dependencies on nonhuman animals can generate reasons to extend them some direct moral consideration. Since moral standing is a function of the considerations one is owed, if dependency generates a reason for anyone to show animals any direct moral consideration (at all or in addition to other moral considerations), then dependency can root moral standing. Whether dependency in fact succeeds as a basis for some moral standing depends on key commitments of our moral and value theories, particularly regarding the scope of moral standing and the truth-conditions of normative claims. If moral standing cannot generate reasons of varying scope and stringency, then dependency will have to be ruled out as a source of moral status, or we would need an idealized notion of dependency. But if there is room for scope variations, then dependency can, in some circumstances, be the basis of some or all of an animal’s moral standing.

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NOTES

1. For ease of expression, from this point forward I substitute “animal” for the more accurate “nonhuman animal.”

2. Use of the terms “thing,” “entity,” or “being” should not be construed to take any position on whether collectives are (or can be) the proper objects of moral consideration. I discuss the possible standing of collectives in Section X.


4. Though they are often correlated, at least formally moral standing can be independent of questions of value. On some substantive accounts, if a being has moral standing, it therefore has moral value. On other substantive accounts, only beings with moral value are candidates for having moral
standing. On other accounts, some or all beings with moral value therefore have moral standing. And still other substantive accounts might disconnect the two issues entirely. Since so far this is only a formal account, it is neutral on such matters as it is on questions of whether beings with moral standing might or must have moral value, instrumental value, or both. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for stressing the need to clarify this point. See also Cohen (2009, 2007) for further discussion of the scalar feature of moral standing.

5. I thank an anonymous referee for suggestions about this issue. The link between human and environmental health is controversial, but we can speak broadly of some such link. For related discussions, see Norton 1992 and Shrader-Frechette 2003.

6. Here I pass over potential determinacy problems inherent in arguing for a shift in moral sensibilities, which is a special problem for the Land Ethic. For related discussions, see Lo (2001).

7. Given controversies in ecological sciences regarding how best to describe biotic systems, any argument appealing to some dependency must establish why that dependency is more significant than viable alternative accounts. Indeed, recent trends in ecology deny that there is any organizing principle to biotic communities. Many claim that the complexity and interdependencies we observe are mere projections of human contrivance on an unorganized heap of organisms and the environments into which they are cast (Sagoff 2006). The stringency of such an ecological eliminativism might jeopardize any appeal to interdependencies as a basis for moral standing. For the purposes of this discussion I shall suppose there is some meaningful basis for ascribing interdependent relationships among two or more things.

8. We can even imagine a sort of cocoamone consequentialism that treats the puppies as directly morally considerable precisely in order to maximize cocoamone production, but I pass over its details.

9. Perhaps they are somehow owed torture-forbidding moral considerations in virtue of their profound vulnerability to human exploitation. Note, though, that such an appeal to puppies’ vulnerability (Goodin 1985) would be a different sort of argument: it would root their moral standing not in human dependency on the animals but in the animals’ dependency on the humans.

10. The example is not entirely fanciful. As Norcross shows, it is a compelling analogue to the factory farming of animals.

11. Reasons of intimacy from a shared history were irrelevant in the case of the man and the dog since, as London makes clear, there was no intimacy between the two.

12. The man’s killing the dog was not necessarily incompatible with the dog’s moral standing with respect to him. Hunting or raising animals for food need not clash with any supposed moral standing. An environmental ethic
can allow that the animals are due direct moral regard but deny that the moral considerations they are owed block being deliberately killed for human purposes. Some American Indian ethical systems have similar precepts (Callicott & Nelson 2004).

13. Though I do not pursue the argument, the pretense might be part of a process of learning to treat an animal as due direct moral regard. Here I also pass over meta-ethical considerations such as whether claims such as “X has moral standing with respect to Y” are truth-apt and whether beliefs figure among the truth-conditions of such claims. But see related discussion by Lo (2006) and Cohen (2007).

14. Justice might constrain belief if it requires various attentive other-regarding moral considerations such as some versions of beneficence, loyalty, or gratitude. Such considerations might be owed to an animal without its necessarily being in a position to claim them. Whether justice subsumes many such key moral considerations is something I do not pursue here. But see a related discussion about “breaking the link between rights and demands” in Badhwar (1993, 266–71).

15. A more precise but unwieldy way of putting this: If the balance of reasons relevant to X with respect to extending C to Y does not favor extending C to Y, then Y’s moral standing with respect to X in regards to C is in jeopardy.

16. There is a separate though related issue about whether moral reasons necessarily motivate. The internalist may say that if there is (undefeated) reason to extend some moral consideration(s), then the human is necessarily motivated in some way to extend it. Various externalists deny that claim and might ask instead if the human being has a separate commitment to doing the right thing.

17. Again, here I pass over the “environmental fascism” objections that some scholars raise against holism. See a discussion at Nelson (1996).

18. Do we owe any gratitude (for or to) comets that smashed into our planet to wipe out dinosaurs and make our mammalian ancestors’ ascent possible?

REFERENCES


