



DISSERTATION | DOCTORAL THESIS

Titel | Title

Pets, Patients and Practical Reasoning
The Moral Relevance of Ordinary Conceptions of Animals

verfasst von | submitted by

Dott. Dott. mag. Erich Linder

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doktor der Philosophie (Dr.phil.)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 792 296

Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt | Field of
study as it appears on the student record
sheet:

Philosophie

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Silvia Caprioglio Panizza PhD
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Herwig Grimm

Pets, Patients and Practical Reasoning

The Moral Relevance of Ordinary Conceptions of Animals

Table of contents

Acknowledgments	1
Abstract (English)	2
Abstract (German).....	3
Submission Overview.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Article 1: Aspect-Seeing in Animal Research: the Absence of Justice in the Harm-Benefit Analysis.	26
Article 2: What is Wrong with Eating Pets? Wittgensteinian Animal Ethics and its Need for Empirical Data	33
Article 3: Scepticism about Moral Certainty	58
Article 4: Who Framed Roger the Rabbit? Autonomy and Ordinary Conceptions of Animals	80
Article 5: What is it like to See an Animal? Self-Examination and the Moral Relevance of Ordinary Descriptions of Animals	102
Article 6: The Hardest Part of the Animal to Swallow Is Their Value	121
Article 7: Live and Let Die: The Distinction Between Doing and Allowing Harm and the Veterinarian's Integrity.....	140
Concluding Discussion	148

Acknowledgments

I was very fortunate to receive feedback and support from many people while writing this dissertation. I would first like to thank my supervisors, Herwig Grimm for inspiring and encouraging me to walk unorthodox paths and for patiently bringing clarity to my scattered ideas. And Silvia Caprioglio Panizza for her sharp and thoughtful criticisms, as well as for keeping me aware of the difference between nuanced and feeble thought.

I am grateful to all the fellow researchers who either briefly crossed my path or accompanied me for longer stretches in my philosophical explorations. I thank Konstantin Eckl for his countless comments to my drafts and his unflinching friendship. Thanks to Konstantin Deininger for his prudent guidance, to Katharina Enbilimli for making me feel part of the office, and to Johanna Karg for the porcine discussions and the shared meals.

Many others generously shared feedback on my work and more general practical advice that greatly helped me overcome practical and theoretical obstacles. Among them, I would like to thank, in no particular order, Carlo Salzani, Hannah Winther, Suzanne Truong, Svenja Springer, Lisa Kopf, Jackson Sawatzky, Leah Ritterfeld, Judith Benz-Schwarzburg, Nina Collin, Serhij Kiš, Niklas Forsberg, Guido Caccialupi and Lisa Tragbar. And thanks to Eva Schwarzingner for always rescuing me from the brambles of bureaucracy.

I thank also the students of the *Tierethik* seminar at the University of Vienna and the students at the *Interdisciplinary Course on Human-Animal Interactions* at the Messerli Research Institute for the lively discussions.

I am grateful to all my friends at home and abroad for their support, and to Caterina for her loving patience and for the time spent as a *PhO* in the path towards the PhD.

I am grateful to my family, who did not just provide me with more support than one could hope for, but also taught me the value of cultivating knowledge. To my mother for her intellectual integrity, to my father for his tireless curiosity, and to my sister for her primal poetics.

My thoughts also go to my beloved dog Ettore, who taught me the difficulty of coming to terms with animal suffering.

I further would like to thank the Austrian Academy of Sciences for the financial support afforded to me to conduct my research through a DOC-fellowship. I am also grateful to both the Vienna Doctoral Schol of Philosophy and Literar-Mechana for their financial support during the completion of this dissertation.

Abstract (English)

The aim of this dissertation is to assess whether and to what extent ordinary conceptions of animals, e.g., pets, livestock, patients are of moral relevance. Practice-based approaches argue that these conceptions provide a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of human–animal interactions, capturing the practical and relational complexity of everyday life. In contrast, the mainstream position in animal ethics, moral individualists, focus exclusively on the moral relevance of individual’s capacities, such as their sentience. These authors worry that a focus on ordinary conceptions might be a red herring: while analysing the differences that characterise each context and relation, we risk losing sight of the morally relevant characteristics that all animals share. Too much attention to the difference in how we treat other animals might lead to an uncritical endorsement of existing norms or succumbing to moral relativism. However, granted that a focus on the individual’s capacities provides a solid ground for moral criticism and genuine moral insight, dismissing ordinary conceptions *tout court* from moral discourse risks overlooking other relevant aspects of our moral life.

I defend the thesis that ordinary conceptions of animals are indeed of moral relevance, while at the same time avoid uncritically accepting the status quo or falling into moral relativism. To do so, I put forward a thicker conception of the agent than that employed by mainstream approaches to animal ethics. More specifically, I frame the problem about the central issue of this dissertation as a problem faced by the practical reasoner. That is as a problem faced by the agent who reflects on her reason for the possible ways of treating other animals. Moreover, rather than being merely interested in determining what the right treatment of animal is, such an agent primarily aims at making sense of her actions by making sense of the world and herself. This means that the reasons she considers are always reasons that make sense *to her*.

Following this approach, I argue that ordinary conceptions matter not because they determine which treatments are justified, but because of their more general role in practical reasoning: they are necessary for an agent who interacts with animals to understand her actions as her own, since her self-understanding depends on how she conceives of animals in everyday life. For instance, someone who identifies as a veterinarian can understand her actions as her own only if they can conceive other animals as patients. This allows me to argue that ordinary conceptions are necessary for autonomous engagement with animals and provide the ground for a form of moral reflection overlooked by mainstream approaches: self-examination.

By clarifying the specific role of ordinary conceptions in practical reasoning, this dissertation offers a middle ground between practice-based approaches and moral individualists. It shows that while ordinary conceptions are morally significant, attention to them can remain fully consistent with the equal moral consideration of all animals advocated by moral individualists.

Abstract (German)

Das Ziel dieser Dissertation ist es, zu erarbeiten ob, und wenn ja zu welchem Ausmaß, alltägliche Konzeptionen von Tieren als Haustiere, Vieh, Patienten etc., moralische Relevanz haben. Praxisorientierte Zugänge argumentieren, dass diese Konzeptionen nuanciertes und kontextsensibles Verständnis von Mensch-Tier-interaktionen ermöglichen, und so die praktischen und relationalen Komplexitäten unseres täglichen Lebens einfangen. Im Kontrast dazu bezieht sich der moralische Individualismus, als hegemoniale Position in der gegenwärtigen Tierethik, ausschließlich auf die individuellen Kapazitäten von Tieren, wie der Bewusstseinsfähigkeit, als moralisch relevant. Diese Autoren warnen, dass ein Fokus auf alltägliche Konzeptionen eine falsche Fährte darstellt: Wenn wir die Unterschiede analysieren, die spezifischen Kontexte und Relationen auszeichnen, riskieren wir, die moralisch relevanten Eigenschaften aus den Augen zu verlieren, die allen Tieren gemein sind. Ein zu großes Augenmerk auf die Unterschiede in unserer Behandlung von anderen Tieren kann dazu führen, dass wir existierende Normen unkritisch akzeptieren, und so dem moralischen Relativismus anheimfallen. Umgekehrt kann der Ausschluss von alltäglichen Konzeptionen aus dem moralischen Diskurs aber auch dazu führen, dass wir relevante Aspekte unseres moralischen Lebens übersehen - und das auch dann, wenn wir anerkennen, dass ein Fokus auf individuelle Kapazitäten eine solide Basis für moralische Kritik und genuine moralisches Verständnis bietet.

Ich verteidige die Position, dass alltägliche Konzeptionen von Tieren tatsächlich moralische Relevanz haben, ohne dass der Status quo unkritisch akzeptiert, oder moralischer Relativismus angenommen werden muss. Um diese Position zu begründen, schlage ich eine dichtere Konzeption des handelnden Subjekts vor, als es im Mainstream der Tierethik üblich ist. Ich formuliere das Problem, das dieser Dissertation zugrunde liegt, als das Problem, mit dem sich die Akteur:in in der Anwendung der praktischen Vernunft konfrontiert sieht. Es ist dies das Problem der Akteur:in, die über die Gründe für die verschiedenen Möglichkeiten nachdenkt, mit Tieren umzugehen. Außerdem ist eine solche Akteur:in nicht bloß daran interessiert, die richtige Behandlung von Tieren zu identifizieren; vielmehr zielt sie hauptsächlich darauf ab, sich ihre Handlungen verständlich zu machen, indem sie sich die Welt und sich selbst verständlich macht. Das heißt, dass die Gründe, die sie wählt immer auch Gründe sein müssen, die für sie verständlich sind.

Diesem Ansatz folgend argumentiere ich, dass alltägliche Konzeptionen nicht deshalb von Bedeutung sind, weil sie bestimmen, welche Behandlungen gerechtfertigt sind, sondern aufgrund der generellen Rolle, die sie im Gebrauch der praktischen Vernunft einnehmen: Sie sind notwendig, damit ein:e Akteur:in, die mit Tieren interagiert, ihr Handlungen als die ihrigen versteht, da ihr Selbstverständnis davon abhängt, wie sie Tiere im Alltag versteht. So kann etwa jemand, die sich als Tierärztin identifiziert, ihre Handlungen nur als die ihrigen verstehen, wenn sie Tiere als Patienten konzipieren kann. So kann ich argumentieren, dass alltägliche Konzeptionen notwendig für autonome Auseinandersetzung mit Tieren sind, und dass sie die Basis für eine Form von moralischer Reflexion darstellt, die im (tier)ethischen Mainstream übersehen wird: Selbstreflexion.

Indem sie die spezifische Rolle von alltäglichen Konzeptionen in der praktischen Vernunft klarstellt, bietet diese Dissertation eine Zwischenposition zwischen praxisbasierenden Zugängen und dem moralischen Individualismus. Sie zeigt, dass alltägliche Konzeptionen zwar moralisch relevant sind, dass diese Aufmerksamkeit zu schenken aber völlig mit der gleichen moralischen Berücksichtigung aller Tieren kompatibel ist, die moralische Individualisten fordern.

Submission Overview

The following table provides an overview of the status of each article at the time of the dissertation's submission. The articles are listed in the order in which they appear in the text. In the appendix, each author's specific contribution to the co-authored manuscripts is described, along with the signed transparency agreements regarding co-authorship of these articles.

Article	Status	Journal Volume or	Date	Authorship	Quality assurance
A1: Aspect-seeing in Animal Research: the Absence of Justice in the Harm-Benefit Analysis	Published	<i>Transforming Food Systems: Ethics, Innovation and Responsibility. Conference Proceedings</i> (Wageningen Academic)	01/09/2022	Erich Linder (first), Herwig Grimm (last)	Single-blind peer-reviewed
A2: What is wrong with Eating Pets? Wittgensteinian Animal Ethics and Its Need for Empirical Data	Published	<i>Animals</i>	29/08/2023	Erich Linder (first), Herwig Grimm (last)	Double-blind peer-reviewed
A3: Scepticism about Moral Certainty	Submitted	<i>Australasian Journal of Philosophy</i>	23/02/2026	Erich Linder (first), Herwig Grimm (last)	
A4: Who Framed Roger the Rabbit? Autonomy and Ordinary Conceptions of Animals	Revised and Resubmitted	<i>Southern Journal of Philosophy</i>	19/02/2026	Erich Linder	
A5: What is it Like to see an animal? Self-Examination and the Moral Relevance of Ordinary Descriptions of Animals.	Published	In <i>Philosophical Theorizing and its Limits: Anti-Theory in Ethics and Philosophy of Science</i> . (Springer Nature)	12/02/2025	Erich Linder	Open peer-reviewed
A6: The Hardest Part of an Animal to Swallow is their Value	Submitted	<i>Philosophical Psychology</i>	17/02/2026	Erich Linder (first), Silvia Caprioglio Panizza (last)	
A7: Live and Let Die – the Distinction between Doing and Allowing Harm and the Veterinarian's integrity	Published	In <i>EurSafe2024 Proceedings</i> (Wageningen Academic)	03/09/2024	Erich Linder	Single-blind peer-reviewed

Introduction

Thinking about the other animals, and how we are related to them,
and whether we may kill them, eat them, or experiment on them,
takes us right into the existential heart of philosophy.
(Korsgaard 2018, 5)

1 The problem

Suppose a veterinarian comes across three different rabbits during her day: one is her daughter's pet, the other a patient in her private clinic and the last is a pest damaging the vegetable beds in her garden. Does the fact that she encounters them in different contexts and conceives of them in three different ways – i.e., as pet, patient and pest – carry some moral relevance? After all, these rabbits are clearly very similar. They can all, so to speak, be fed with the same food, cared for and hurt in the same manner. They can all enjoy similar pleasures, and all share the same biological and psychological characteristics. These three rabbits seem therefore *prima facie* entitled to equal consideration.

The veterinarian might object that there are important differences between these animals, however. She has special relationships with the pet and the patient. She has a professional responsibility to the latter and a particular emotional bond with the former, whereas the third rabbit is a nuisance. She might protest that the pet is part of her family and taking care of him is an integral part of the activities that she undertakes with her daughter. Whereas the pest ruins her garden, it intrudes her peaceful and idyllic Sunday mornings she spends caring for her plants and vegetables. These are, one might counter, irrelevant nuances of everyday life. Contingent aspects that lead her astray in her thinking and that should not carry any moral weight. The similarities between the three rabbits should be important enough as to warrant an equal treatment. The fact that we cuddle our pets and eat the flesh of the other bears no normative power and should be of interest for anthropologists, psychologists or sociologists whose job is that of explaining and describing the cultural, mental and social life of the human being and not that of the ethicist who is interested in telling us how we ought to act. However, some might protest that we are social beings, and our actions make sense to us on the background of our own understanding of the world shaped by idiosyncrasies and the social and cultural relations in which we find ourselves, within a form of life. Ignoring this manifold of norms and meaning *tout court* might lead us to overlook relevant aspects that contribute to a better understanding of morality itself.

2 Moral individualism: the relevance of individual's capacities

Considerations about psychological and cultural aspects of our moral life have been dismissed through quite an uncompromising solution by the advocates of the most commonly shared thesis in animal ethics, “moral individualism”: This term was initially coined by James Rachels and defined as

a thesis about the justification of judgements concerning how individuals may be treated. The basic idea is that how an individual may be treated is to be determined, not by considering his group membership, but by considering his own particular characteristics (Rachels 1990, 173).

Rachels' moral individualism aims at rejecting the idea that all human beings deserved special moral consideration in virtue of their species membership¹ and provides a clear strategy to point out the inconsistencies and the wrongness of our treatment of the other animals.

If the idea of killing other fellow humans for consumption makes us cringe in disgust, how can we justify the indifference or approval that accompanies the slaughtering of animals for food consumption? According to moral individualism we need to point out morally relevant characteristics that humans, and no other animal possess that justify our killing of the latter but prohibit us from slaughtering the former. Since all the characteristics allegedly possessed exclusively by human that one might come up with are not relevant for the matter at hand, the moral individualist claims, we are not justified in killing certain animals. What we think makes humans worthy of moral consideration can be found in some of the other animals as well. The moral individualist thesis is then always paired with a principle of equality which compels us to treat as equal every being equally in possession of the relevant moral characteristics (Rachels 1990, 175).

Moral individualism may thus be conceived as one side of a conceptual coin, with anti-speciesism being the other. Although the first explicit articulation of moral individualism is attributable to

¹ The thesis that humans deserve moral consideration in virtue of their species membership is usually defended, Rachels claims, by appealing to the idea of human dignity which in turn rests on either the presupposition that humans are created in the image of God, or on the idea that humans are the only rational animals (Rachels 1990, 171). In his book, Rachels rejects this view and argues that – in light of Darwin's discovery of natural selection – we have little reasons to maintain the first claim and that the second is false.

One does not need to follow Rachels' rejection of the claim that humans are the only rational animals to accord moral consideration to the other animals, however. Even if there was a gulf between our intellects we wouldn't necessarily be committed to establish a radical moral divide between human and non-human animals. Rachels is worried about Kant's position who excludes moral consideration to the other animals in virtue of their alleged lack of rationality (Kant 2011). However, against (and with) Kant, Christine Korsgaard maintained that it is precisely in virtue of our rational nature that we have obligations to the other animals (2018). This divide might consist in claiming that humans are the only moral agents, but this only means that they are the only beings who can assume moral responsibility (see Rowlands 2012 for an alternative view on this).

Rachels, the structure of Peter Singer's argument against *speciesism* in *Animal Liberation* clearly exemplifies its logic. Singer seeks to identify the morally relevant characteristics that might distinguish human beings from non-human animals, characteristics which, if absent in animals, could justify difference in moral consideration. Finding no such traits that are both universally human and exclusively so, he concludes that our preferential treatment of human beings is not grounded in reason, but in an unwarranted bias, what he, following Richard Ryder, terms "speciesism" (Singer 1975, 3; see also Ryder 1971, 81).

Even though the term moral individualism was first used to reject the appeal to *species membership* to justify differences in treatment, it has increasingly been employed to capture a broader thesis: that the social and cultural contingencies through which we encounter animals do not provide a defensible basis for different moral treatment. In other words, ordinary conceptions are morally irrelevant. According to this view, we are not only precluded from justifying preferential treatment of one animal over another on the grounds of species membership, but we are likewise not warranted in doing so on the basis of the specific relations or contexts in which we engage with them.

Although moral individualism originally referred to the claim that an animal's species should not determine its moral status, it is now frequently used to express a more specific idea: namely, that the only relevant factors in determining how an animal ought to be treated are her individual capacities. Indeed, in much of the literature, the term has been employed to denote the view that moral status ought to be grounded solely in an animal's "individual capacities" (May 2014) – also called "intrinsic properties" (McMahan 2005; Delon 2015) – such as sentience or other morally salient biological or psychological traits (see, e.g., Rachels 1990; McMahan 2005; Crary 2010; Grimm and Wild 2016; May 2014; Delon 2015; Coghlan 2016; Huth 2020). This interpretation entails the rejection of not only species membership as morally irrelevant, but also the contextual relationships and practices through which animals are encountered. Singer's utilitarianism and Regan's rights approach are often mentioned as examples of such an approach (Diamond 1978; Crary 2010; May 2014; Delon 2015; Grimm and Wild 2016) for they focus on the claim that our treatment of nonhuman animals should be determined by evaluating whether they possess certain morally relevant capacities – namely, the capacity to experience pain – in Singer's case (Singer 1975)² – or the characteristics that define a being as a "subject-of-a-life" – in Regan's (Regan 1982).³ These capacities are then deemed morally

² There are consequentialists such as Jeff Sebo that take the capacity for agency rather than that of feeling pleasure and pain to be a viable option to evaluate consequences (Sebo 2017).

³ Other right's theorists claim that sentience is sufficient to have moral status (Francione 2008; Steiner 2008).

relevant in virtue of the normative theories these authors are committed to.⁴ And it is only these capacities that we need to look for to determine what moral treatment is due to the other animals. According to these approaches, then, the only relevant aspects of an animal are her intrinsic properties. And the fact that a veterinarian encounters these rabbits in different contexts shouldn't bear any normative significance *per se*. They all possess the relevant properties which provide us with reasons to apply the appropriate moral principle, be it the principle for maximising utility in Singer's case or that of respecting an animal's inherent value in Tom Regan's. So that, if the veterinarian were committed to utilitarianism, she would have to act towards the three rabbits in a way that increases the amount of utility, independently on whether she has a specific relationship with her pet or her patient. The merit of such an approach is that it allows us to provide quite a straightforward argument to provide critical reflection and condemn the current infliction of suffering that characterise human-animal interaction.

The moral individualist's approach allows, then, to secure a firm ground upon which they can grant a moral status to the other animals and the high ground to criticise the many practices that inflict suffering to billions of animals every day. The agent who is persuaded by the moral individualist position then will be equipped with two tools to determine how they ought to act: an impartial outlook composed by the principle of equality and the knowledge that some individuals merit moral considerations in virtue of their capacities. Elements of the context, her idiosyncratic dispositions and the way she sees and understand the world are bound to a psychological dimension that merely stains our rationality, our impartiality and, our way to look at things clearer.

Nonetheless, such a radically egalitarian approach seems to lose some important aspects of the complexity that characterises human-animal interaction. There is, one might say, something intuitively amiss in the claim that all our encounters with animals are morally equivalent. The manner in which we perceive an animal – as a companion, a stray, or a wild creature – appears to carry a certain experiential salience, shaping the meaningfulness of our encounter in ways that resist a reduction of the animal to a mere bundle of properties. To abstract and reduce the particular being

⁴ As Delon notices, “moral individualism is a formal, metanormative, rather than a substantive, thesis about our obligations” (Delon 2015, 33). Meaning that it is a general thesis that can be applied irrespectively of the normative and axiological commitments that a particular author has. Moral individualism is endorsed by philosophers committed to a variety of different normative doctrines: consequentialists approaches (e.g., Singer 1975; Norcross 2004; McMahan 2005; Višak 2013; Sebo 2023), right's theorists (e.g., Regan 1982; Jamieson 1983; Pluhar 1995; Francione 2008), contractarians (e.g., Rowlands 1997) and authors inspired by Kant (Korsgaard 2018), and Aristotle (Nussbaum 2006; 2023; Korsgaard 2018). Even though these authors differ in their axiological and normative commitments they all share the idea that our diverse ways in which we treat similar animals differently is, all things being equal, unjustified and morally wrong, and that the fact that animals are conceived as companion or vermin is to be ascribed only to socio-cultural contingencies that must be rejected from a moral standpoint.

before us into a mere aggregation of properties, some deemed morally relevant and others not, risks eliding dimensions of moral experience that are, at the very least, not easily reducible.

Returning to the perspective of the veterinarian introduced at the outset, we might have the impression that there is something resistant in the notion that the three rabbits are simply moral equals. The ways in which we ordinarily conceive of and describe animals – as pets, patients, or pests (hereafter referred to as “ordinary conceptions”) – seem to bear normative significance. If that is the case, then particular relations, cultural context and psychological disposition may be understood not simply as sources of distortion to be stripped away in the name of impartiality, but as fundamental elements of moral thought itself. What the moral individualist regards as obfuscations may, in fact, be integral to the moral landscape we inhabit. Rather than staining the purity of practical reason, ordinary conceptions might, in fact enrich it and may even be constitutive of it.

3 Criticism of moral individualism

Among moral individualist’s critics, there are different opinions regarding the extent to which ordinary conceptions should be morally relevant. Some claim that our encounters with animals in different context provides us with reasons to slightly recalibrate the claim that all animals are equal, and claim that even though we should still adopt an impartial standpoint and assign basic moral consideration to all animals, we owe particular duties to some of them. These authors would endorse the moral individualist’s overall strategy⁵ but still insists that the approach of the pioneers is overly demanding (Abbate 2014; Fisher, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023), or that it ignores some obligations which obtain only in the context of particular relationships (Palmer 2010; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011).⁶

⁵ It is important to notice that there are at least two ways to interpret the moral individualists thesis: the first is the idea that the *only* things that matter are an individual’s intrinsic capacities and the second is the idea that an individual’s capacities are a *sufficient* ground to have moral status but that there might be some other aspects relative to the particular context that the animal finds itself that provide us with other moral reasons: the veterinarian might have some basic obligations to every rabbit but particular obligations only to the pet and the patient. Todd May, for example, understands moral individualism in the former way and depicts it as the claim that we should only care about reasons that stem from an animal’s capacities and that the particular relations that we have, for example, with our dog doesn’t provide us with any moral reasons (May 2014).

Even though this depiction is accurate for philosophers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan, it is not accurate for all of them. McMahan, for example, claims that: “it is foundational to moral individualism that we share that only intrinsic properties can be status-conferring and give rise to agent-neutral moral reasons” (McMahan 2005, 357). This position does not entail that there cannot be further moral reasons – agent-relative reasons, for instance – that an agent might have *in addition* to those given by an animal’s characteristics (McMahan 2005, 254). This then means that we might all have reasons to recognise that animals deserve moral consideration but still think that in virtue of particular relationships we might have particular reasons to privilege them and still consider ourselves moral individualists (McMahan 2005, 359). Authors like Clare Palmer, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka accept that we have basic obligations to animals in virtue of their capacities but differentiate the kind of obligations that different relations generate.

⁶ To solve this problem, these authors adopt what we might call a broader interpretation of moral individualism. Some, like Clare Palmer, argue that our duties differ between domestic and wild animals (2010); others, such as Cheryl Abbate,

Other authors go further and show that both moral individualists and these moderate critics fail to appreciate the complexity of our moral life and the depth that ordinary conceptions of animals can reveal (Diamond 1978; 2001; 2003; Hursthouse 2006; Crary 2009; 2010; Gruen 2015; Gaita 2017; Crary and Gruen 2022; Panizza 2022). These authors take issue with the moral individualist's overall approach and its aspiration for rationalism and impartiality. They reject the idea that our moral life should – and can – be explored only by means of universal principles and an impartial outlook to determine what we ought to do, and rather turn to approaches who favour placing the source of our moral life in the particular contexts, relations and practices in which agents find themselves. For these authors the tables ought to be turned: it is description of our actual moral life that takes priority over the obligation prescribed to us by an impartial standpoint. It is by accurately describing our moral outlook and particular situations that we decide how to get along with our fellow creatures.

The most radical expression of such a position is that of the so-called Wittgensteinians (e.g., Diamond 1978; Crary 2010; Gaita 2017) who claim that our moral life cannot be reduced to moments of impartial reflection, where agents confront a world of beings characterised by morally relevant or irrelevant properties. Instead, Wittgensteinians call attention to the concepts embedded in our form of life as a source of morally meaningful thought. Cora Diamond, for example, argues that our understanding of how animals are to be treated is developed by engaging in practical contexts where animals are conceived as companions, wild animals or pests and not as abstract and philosophical constructs (Diamond 1978; 1995). Our understanding of animals, and our reasons for treating them one way rather than another, arise from these ordinary conceptions – not from abstract reflection on moral principles or individual characteristics.

These considerations pertain not only to the processes by which we come to understand what animals are, but also how to distinguish them from each other and from human beings. As Cora Diamond observes, our grasp of what a human being is, emerges, *inter alia*, through forms of life, through practices such as “sitting at a table where WE eat THEM” (Diamond 1978, 470; see also Diamond 1995, 348; Taylor, 2019, 228; Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2024). The difference between us and other animals is not to be conceived – as moral individualists say – by picking up similar properties from individual beings composed by cluster of properties – but rather has to be understood as a difference that is conceptualised in practices. Our conception is thus not merely, so to speak, taxonomical but lived and normatively inflected. Indeed, as Diamond further notes (1978, 478), and

claim that we have particular obligations to companion animals (2023; see also Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Still others propose hybrid approaches, suggesting that we should apply principle coming from different normative theories depending on whether we are dealing with, humans, wild animals or domestic animals (Fisher, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023, Sebo 2023, Killoren and Streiffer 2023).

as echoed in Taylor (2019, 226), the difference in treatment of animals is embedded in our practices: domestic pets are enveloped in relations of intimacy and care, while animals employed in scientific research are conceived – and consequently handled – as sensitive instruments of inquiry, designed to yield scientific knowledge rather than companionship. It is then through the conception of an animal as a pet or as delicate tool that we learn how to treat them and not through that of an animal as a subject-of-a-life. The latter is a theoretical artifact that has little to do with our form-of-life.

Privileging the description of our actual life is not a completely innocent move, however. There is a catch. And it's no small one: if we only determine how to act on the basis of the ways in which we already conceive of the world, if we choose how to treat other animals exclusively by seeing how we were taught to treat them, don't we risk ending up just defending the status quo? If we accept that our moral deliberations always begin, and end, with ordinary conceptions of animals, and that moral individualism risks alienating agents from their actions, we might be inclined to endorse a relativist thesis, according to which an agent's obligations are determined exclusively by the practices in which she finds herself. So that, for example, Jessica has reasons to take care of her rabbit *because* it is her pet and the concept of "pet" provides her with particular rules that she ought to follow: pets are animals that one should care for, let in our houses etc. If we focus exclusively on the description of the particularities of human-animal interaction and assume that it is in these practices that we find action-guidance we risk giving up the possibility to critically reflect on our actions. Such concerns are often raised against Wittgensteinian and other practice-based approaches who stress the importance on how people already think about moral matters (e.g., O'Neill 1986, 4; Korsgaard 2022). The risk is that if we dismiss the importance of an impartial gaze and of an appeal to rational principles the "nature of normativity is lost" (Aaltola 2010, 37; see also May 2014, 162).

There is then a tension, with the moral individualists on the one hand who provide us with a simple depiction of our moral life but with strong arguments as to why we have reasons to treat the other animals differently from how we already treat them, and on the other we have approaches such as that of the Wittgensteinians who gain in descriptive accuracy but risk losing the high ground from which to criticise and reflect on our current treatment of the other animals. On the one hand, we encounter a dispassionate world inhabited by rational agents, intent upon securing a defensible moral standpoint and determining which properties confer moral status, and which animals possess them; on the other we find people embedded in relationships with companions, patients, and wild animals, participating in different practices and forms of engagement, yet lacking clarity as to whether, and on what conceptual grounds, they ought to treat these animals differently.

In this dissertation I tackle this tension by focusing particularly on the ways in which ordinary conceptions of animals are of relevance if we endorse a more realistic conception of the moral agent than that put forward by the moral individualist. As I already mentioned there are various ways that one can tackle the idea that ordinary conceptions are morally relevant. Some authors have focused on the intrinsic moral relevance embedded in our practices and ordinary conceptions. Their moral relevance ought to be interpreted as favouring an argument for axiological pluralism: by looking at the ways in which we conceive of animals in our practices and language games we can engage with the complexity and the much-underexplored wisdom of our moral life. For example, some Wittgensteinians argue that the individualist framework fails to account for concepts like irreducible dignity or non-experiential harms (Hämäläinen 2012; Gaita 2017; Gruen and Crary 2022, 79-98; Coghlan 2024). By doing so, however, these authors shift the focus of their attention away from the moral psychology of the agent and thereby overlook a fundamental aspect of morality: that the questions regarding the moral status of an animal and the moral obligations that we might have towards them are questions that we ultimately face as agent's occupying a particular and context-dependent standpoint.⁷ So even though I follow the Wittgensteinians in further exploring our moral life, my focus is on the first-person's standpoint of the practical reasoner embedded in a particular context surrounded by pets, patients pest and other animals conceived through the lenses of ordinary language.

4 Theoretical framework and research question

In this dissertation, I show the importance of ordinary conceptions of animals by focusing on their importance for particular agents. To tackle the problem, I will rely on the work of those authors that have rejected the portrayal of the agent put forward by traditional moral theories. Indeed, since the latter half of the 20th century, the disconnect between moral theory and moral agents has been understood as a problem concerning authority. A pivotal moment in this development was Elizabeth Anscombe's *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958), which challenged the foundations of modern ethical theory and called for a return to a more psychologically realistic account of moral reasoning. In particular, moral theory is seen as lacking the authority needed to guide our actions (see Christensen 2021, 36-44). This criticism was shared by many scholars and not prerogative of Wittgensteinian approaches and put forward, among others, by Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of*

⁷ To be clear, not every Wittgensteinians avoids discussing the psychological and existential consequences that our encounters with the other animals have on our subjectivity (see e.g., Diamond 2003; Mulhall 2008)

Philosophy (2011) (see also e.g., Midgley 1978; McDowell 1979; MacIntyre 1978; Wollheim 1984; Williams 2011; Murdoch 2013).

Williams argued that the fundamental ethical question, “How should one live?”, is directed to a particular individual whose actions are guided by culturally situated ethical concepts and rejects the idea that philosophers can establish how people ought to live from an idealized impartial standpoint. Moreover, moral theory does not have the authority to do so, because it fails to tie with our motivations and imposes on us demands that we do not recognise as internal to our set of motivations (Williams 2011; see also Queloz 2023). Moral theory demands that what “an individual ought, objectively, to do for moral reasons need lie neither within the individual’s current motivational set nor in what might be called their ‘extendible set.’”⁸ (Wilson 2018, 238). And Williams, along with other philosophers (e.g., Anscombe 1958; MacIntyre 1978; Annas 2011), denied that moral theory had such an authority over us.

In line with his Humean view of motivation, Williams was centrally concerned with whether moral theory could generate reasons for action that are genuinely connected to an agent’s psychology (see Williams 2012, 101-113). On their behalf, Wittgensteinians focus less on motivational failure and more on how moral theory presents a distorted picture of moral life – one that imposes alien conceptual frameworks upon us. The issue is not just that moral theory may fail to motivate; it may also undermine our understanding by displacing the concepts that structure our experience. In this sense, moral theory can epistemically estrange us from the moral world we inhabit – a world constituted by concepts embedded in practices. If we give up the concepts harvested through communal efforts in practice in favour of concepts formulated from ivory towers, we lose a thicker understanding of the world (see e.g., Diamond 1988).

In this dissertation I understand the Wittgensteinian criticism to moral individualism as an integration of Williams’ position and claim that moral theory deprives agents from a meaningful connection to their actions.⁹ David J. Velleman provides an exemplary synthesis for such an approach. He engages

⁸ That is, a set of motivations and desires that an individual might have in other circumstances, e.g., in the future.

⁹ It is important to note that this line of criticism against moral individualism does not apply uniformly to all philosophers who may be described as moral individualists. The objection in question is not primarily aimed at the claim that only animals possessing morally relevant properties deserve moral consideration; rather, it targets a broader commitment to moral theories that conceive of agents as ideally impartial and rational beings, as exemplified in Peter Singer’s utilitarianism and Tom Regan’s deontology. I call this subset of moral individualists “the orthodoxy” (see article 2 and 5). In these accounts, moral demands are treated as independent of the agent’s motivational structure: they may remain opaque or even unintelligible to the individual, yet the agent is nevertheless deemed to be bound by them. However, not all moral individualists share this conception of moral obligation. Authors such as Simone Pollo (2021), who draws on a Humean understanding of moral motivation, and Christine Korsgaard (2018), who grounds normativity in reflective endorsement (1996), do not commit to this disconnection between moral demands and the agent’s psychology and still provide robust arguments in favour of extending moral consideration to the other animals.

with both William's and Diamond's concerns by arguing that meaningful action arises from the internal capacities of reflective agency.¹⁰ Action must be intelligible not just in abstract rational terms, but from within the agent's own outlook. If moral theory demands forms of reasoning or motivation that are unrecognizable from the standpoint of this reflective self, it not only risks motivational failure (Williams's worry), but also threatens the conditions of intelligibility that make action meaningful in the first place (Diamond's worry) (Velleman 2009; 2014).

Framing the problem of the diversity of human–animal interactions in terms of the challenges faced by a particular moral agent – rather than as an abstract problem to be resolved through the application of impartial principles – permits a more nuanced and innovative account of the complexity inherent in such interactions. The problem confronting the agent is not solely a matter of whether certain principles ought to be applied to abstract entities; it is a problem approached from the agent's first-person's standpoint. That is to say, it is a problem for the practical reasoner, the being who reflects upon whether she has good reasons to act in a given manner within a particular context and whether these reasons make sense to her.

This approach, however, shares the difficulty previously identified in relation to the Wittgensteinian framework: namely, the risk of inadvertently endorsing the status quo or in this specific case, more problematically, of justifying any action deemed appropriate only from the agent's subjective perspective. Consequently, when considering the moral significance of ordinary conceptions of animals, I must proceed with caution to avoid endorsing a position that shuts down critical engagement and reflection on an agent's actions. In other words, even though I am going to argue for the idea that ordinary conceptions of animals are of moral relevance, I must be careful not ending up claiming that ordinary conceptions of animals provide us with a justification for our actions, and say for example that since we treat cows as livestock, we are warranted in slaughtering them and devour them. I will discuss the issue of the legitimization of the status quo in more depth in the concluding discussion.

Accordingly, the overarching research question guiding this dissertation is as follows: *In what ways can ordinary conceptions of animals, understood from the perspective of particular agents, possess moral relevance without lapsing into moral relativism or unreflectively reinforcing the status quo?*

¹⁰ Velleman does not directly engage with the writings of Diamond. However, he develops his theory of agency by relying on the works of other authors influenced by Wittgenstein, particularly on the work of G.E.M. Anscombe (2000; see Velleman 2004; 2009).

5 Sub research questions and respective articles

The answer I shall defend is twofold: ordinary conceptions of animals are morally relevant, first, because they are a necessary condition for the *autonomy* of agents in human–animal interactions, and second, because they enable those agents to engage in *self-examination*. To substantiate this answer and elaborate on the relevance of the question, I present several sub-research questions which will be addressed by different articles. I will now first provide an overview of all the sub-research questions and how they will be addressed by the respective articles.

Sub-research question and respective articles:

- a) **What are the potentials and the limits of a practice-based approach to animal ethics?**

Articles: A1, A2, A3.

- b) **What kind of reasons do ordinary conceptions of animals ground and what is their relevance for practical reason?**

Article: A4

- c) **How do ordinary conceptions of animals ground self-examination? And what is its moral potential?**

Articles: A5, A6, A7

- a) **What are the potentials and the limits of a practice-based approach to animal ethics?**

Respective articles:

A1: *Aspect-Seeing in Animal Research: the Absence of Justice in the Harm-Benefit Analysis* with Herwig Grimm

A2: *What Is Wrong with Eating Pets? Wittgensteinian Animal Ethics and Its Need for Empirical Data* with Herwig Grimm

A3: *Scepticism about Moral Certainty* with Herwig Grimm

These articles adopt a context-sensitive approach inspired by the later philosophy of Wittgenstein and critically engage directly with contemporary Wittgensteinian scholarship. Central to this orientation is the idea that reasons for action are grounded not in abstract principles but in the practices that constitute our form of life. These articles contribute to answering the research questions by providing an overview of a context-sensitive Wittgensteinian approach and explore its potentials and limitations.

In **A1**, we develop a Wittgensteinian strategy in order to criticise the harm–benefit analysis commonly used to evaluate research protocols involving animals in scientific experimentation. Our critique

draws on Wittgenstein's concept of *aspect-seeing* (e.g., Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 207, 213), further developed by Reshef Agam-Segal (2014; 2015). This notion captures the way in which an object may be seen under different aspects – a phenomenon classically illustrated by the ambiguous rabbit-duck figure. One may perceive the image either as a duck or as a rabbit, but not both simultaneously. As Agam-Segal argues, this perceptual shift depends upon which concept we apply: the concept of a duck or that of a rabbit. The concept employed not only determines what we see but also governs the language-game within which we are able to meaningfully engage. Thus, if we see the figure as a rabbit, it makes no sense to refer to its beak; if we see a duck, instead, it would be meaningless to point out the fluffiness of its ears.

We employ this idea of aspect-seeing to argue that the harm–benefit analysis imposes upon us a particular way of seeing the animal – namely, as an instrument or utility-bearing object – and thereby forecloses the possibility of perceiving the animal as a rights-bearing being. In so doing, the harm-benefit analysis inhibits meaningful engagement with discourses of justice and reduces the moral terrain to a singular evaluative axis: that of utility. The strategy we adopt is distinctly Wittgensteinian, insofar as we do not appeal to abstract moral theories but instead seek to render explicit the ways in which animals are conceptualised and to illuminate the implicit normative commitments entailed by such conceptualisations.

In **A2**, we offer an account of a Wittgensteinian, practice-based approach to moral reasoning, contrasting it with the impartial theory-driven orientation characteristic of some moral individualists such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan. We refer to these authors as “the orthodoxy in animal ethics” instead of the “moral individualist” as we highlight their commitment to moral theory (I will adopt the term “orthodoxy” also in **A5**). Such a commitment to impartial theories is not a necessary feature for a moral individualist – albeit a very common one among them – but rather a strategy adopted by most authors committing to the normative and meta-ethical assumptions of the two pioneers of animal ethics.

In this paper we illustrate the different ways in which Wittgensteinians and orthodox approaches ground reasons for action. On the practice-based understanding of the Wittgensteinian view, an agent's reason for acting is embedded in the socially and historically situated practices through which animals are conceived. Advocates of the orthodoxy, by contrast, appeal to abstract representations of animals and to moral theories alienated from lived practices.

For the Wittgensteinians our reasons to treat a pet in particular way is established within the practice of pet-keeping. Instead, we show how advocates of the orthodoxy ground such reasons in moral

theorising and in scientific inquiry aimed at identifying the biological and psychological capacities of non-human animals. Accordingly, from the Wittgensteinian perspective, *moral criticism* does not proceed via a top-down application of ethical theory. Rather, it arises through a careful examination of the conceptual resources made available by ordinary practices and the specific contexts in which these practices are embedded.

We proceed by identifying a limitation that marks certain contributions within the Wittgensteinian literature. In discussing morally complex situations, Wittgensteinian authors often rely on anecdotal observation, personal assumptions, or literary examples to construct the relevant context. While such resources may serve an illustrative function, we argue that they are insufficient *when the aim* is to arrive at sound moral judgments concerning the actions *of others*. A robust practice-based approach, we contend, must also attend to the empirical data provided by the social sciences. Only by doing so can it adequately account for the diversity and complexity of moral life as it is actually lived.

In **A3**, we address the concern that Wittgensteinian approaches risk forfeiting a solid and shared moral foundation. The Wittgensteinian refusal to ground moral thought in rationally established principles places them in a difficult position, as they must explain how they avoid collapsing into relativism. In recent times, authors drawing on Wittgenstein's epistemological remarks in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1975) – originally concerned with the foundations of empirical knowledge – have transposed these insights into the domain of moral thought. They argue that our moral discourse rests upon an indubitable and shared bedrock. According to some authors (e.g., Pleasants 2009; Hermann 2015; Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2024) we cannot but regard certain actions – such as killing or cheating – as wrong. This shared foundation, which they term “moral certainty,” is said to constitute the firm ground upon which all moral discourse must rest, and which no one could seriously doubt.

Our evaluation of this proposal, however, is negative. Having analysed three contemporary conceptions of moral certainty, we argue that none fulfils the two necessary conditions for a ground of moral thought: it must be universally shared, and it must be capable of halting the regress argument posed by the moral sceptic.

b) What kind of reasons do ordinary conceptions of animals ground and what is their relevance for practical reason?

Respective Article:

A4: *Who Framed Roger the Rabbit? Autonomy and Ordinary Conceptions of Animals*

In **A4**, I argue that ordinary conceptions of animals are relevant to practical reason because they are necessary for securing the autonomy of agents whose self-understanding is shaped by their relation

to animals. The argument proceeds by distinguishing between two interpretations of the claim that such conceptions are relevant to practical reason: either they provide justificatory reasons, or they provide explanatory reasons. I contend that much of the suspicion surrounding the Wittgensteinian approach stems from the ambiguity with which these two notions have been treated. In particular, if we take ordinary conceptions to offer justificatory reasons, we risk endorsing the status quo, since what is “ordinarily” conceived may simply reflect entrenched social norms rather than moral insight.

Instead, I argue that we should treat these as explanatory reasons – reasons that enable an agent to understand and make sense of their own actions. Explanatory reasons are typically invoked to explain the actions of others: we might say, for instance, that someone is a policeman to explain why they carry a gun, or that someone is a climber if we observe them with climbing shoes attached to their backpack. In this article, however, I approach explanatory reasons from the first-person perspective of an agent seeking to make sense of their own actions.

In doing so, I follow the moral psychology of constitutivism – particularly that of Velleman (see also Korsgaard 2009) – according to which an agent must understand their actions as their own in order to act autonomously. This involves situating those actions against the background of their self-conception. This shift in perspective serves two purposes: first, it lays the groundwork for arguing that ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary to secure the autonomy of some agents; second, it highlights the agent’s role as a self-reflective being, rather than a passive follower of social norms. This article contributes to the research question by providing a description of the relation between ordinary conceptions of animals and both an agent’s self-conception and her autonomy. Moreover, its analysis on the kind of reasons that are involved when discussing ordinary conceptions of animals allows me to provide a clear understanding of what we mean when we say that these conceptions are relevant for our moral life.

c) How do ordinary conceptions of animals ground self-examination? And what is its moral potential?

Respective Articles:

A5: *What is it Like to see an Animal? Self-Examination and the Moral Relevance of Ordinary Descriptions of Animals.*

A6: *The Hardest Part of an Animal to Swallow is their Value* with Silvia Caprioglio Panizza.

A7: *Live and Let Die – the Distinction between Doing and Allowing Harm and the Veterinarian’s Integrity.*

In **A5**, I offer a more comprehensive account of the limitations of moral individualism and outline, with greater precision, how an approach to animal ethics grounded in a robust moral psychology might be developed. Rather than relying solely on the Wittgensteinian practice-based framework, I draw on the work of Iris Murdoch and Velleman to articulate a richer conception of moral psychology.

This proposal is developed by critically re-examining the core assumptions of moral individualism and reframe the criticism moved to them by the Wittgensteinians. I identify its central commitments and formulate a critique in the spirit of Murdoch's attack on moral theorists such as Richard M. Hare. My central objection is that, in excluding the subjective dimension of moral deliberation – namely, the agent's first-person perspective – moral individualism impoverishes our understanding of ourselves and other animals, reducing moral agents to abstract evaluators and neglecting different forms of moral thinking: such as self-examination.

This and the following articles then contribute to answering the research question by focusing and exploring the importance that self-examination bears in our moral life. In **A5** I discuss how self-examination might play an important role for an agent who faces the difficult and concrete choice on whether to euthanise their companion.

In **A6**, my co-author and I further explore the potential of exploring the subjectivity of moral agents by tackling the problem of rationalisation. We suggest interpreting “appeals to naturalness” – arguments used to justify our current treatment of animals by pointing to the brutality of the natural world – as rationalisations rather than as arguments aimed at establishing a moral truth. Instead of just dismissing these arguments through dialectics, we argue that examining their underlying motivations might shed light to the existential difficulties that engaging in moral thinking about other animals confronts us with.

In **A7**, I examine how adopting specific moral principles entails an implicit commitment to a particular self-conception. Drawing on the distinction between doing and allowing harm, I show that one's normative commitments reflect different models of agency – either that of the impartial maximiser or the context-bound individual. I then apply this framework to the case of veterinarians, arguing that the profession implicitly requires equal consideration of harm done and harm allowed. Yet this moral demand conflicts with the fact that veterinarians are not only professionals but also individuals with personal projects and attachments. Denying the moral significance of the doing/allowing distinction risks undermining their sense of self by imposing excessive negative responsibility.

This argument aligns with the view, shared by Williams, Velleman, and Korsgaard, that our moral

obligations shape who we are, and that moral theory is not exempt from the demands of identity. The article thus explores the role of our identity in moral decision-making, and the extent to which moral theory risks undermining the integrity of the agent.

These articles then contribute to answering the research question by highlighting the importance of self-examination in our moral life and by making the link between such form of thinking with ordinary conceptions of animals. Thus, with these articles I argue that ordinary conceptions are of relevance for our moral life, from an agent's perspective, because they allow us to engage in self-examination and are necessary for acting autonomously. In the final discussion I sum up my findings and clarify in what way they do not lead me to endorse moral relativism and to unreflectively accept the status quo. I further explore what repercussion my thesis has for moral individualism.

References

- Aaltola, Elisa. "The Anthropocentric Paradigm and the Possibility of Animal Ethics." *Ethics & the Environment* 15, no. 1 (2010): 27–50.
- Abbate, Cheryl. 2014. "Virtues and Animals: A Minimally Decent Ethic for Practical Living in a Non-Ideal World." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27: 909–929.
- Agam-Segal, R. 2014. "When Language Gives Out: Conceptualization, and Aspect-Seeing as a Form of Judgement." *Metaphilosophy* 1: 41–68.
- . 2015 "Aspect-Perception as a Philosophical Method." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 4 (1): 93–121.
- Annas, Julia. 2011. *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1958. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33 (124): 1–19.
- . 2000. *Intention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Christensen, Anne Marie. S. 2021. *Moral Philosophy and Moral Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coghlan, Simon. 2016. "Moral Individualism and Relationalism: A Narrative-Style Philosophical Challenge." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19: 1241–1257.
- . 2024. "An Irreducible Understanding of Animal Dignity." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 55 (1): 124–142.
- Crary, Alice. 2010. "Minding What Already Matters: A Critique of Moral Individualism." *Philosophical Topics*: 17–49.
- . 2009. *Beyond Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crary, Alice, and Lori Gruen. 2022. *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

- Deininger, Konstantin, Andreas Aigner, and Herwig Grimm. 2024. "Resisting Moral Conservatism with Difficulties of Reality: A Wittgensteinian-Diamondian Approach to Animal Ethics." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 58 (3): 495–513.
- Delon, Nicolas. 2015. "Against Moral Intrinsicism." In *Animal Ethics and Philosophy: Questioning the Orthodoxy*, edited by Elisa Aaltola and James Hardley, 31–45. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Diamond, Cora. 1978. "Eating Meat and Eating People." *Philosophy* 53 (206): 465–479.
- . 1988. "Losing Your Concepts." *Ethics* 98 (2): 255–277.
- . 1995. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- . 2001. "Injustice and Animals." In *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, 118–148. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 2003. "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1 (2): 1–26. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0090>
- Donaldson, Sue, and Will Kymlicka. 2011. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fischer, Bob, Clare Palmer, and Thomas J. Kasperbauer. 2023. "Hybrid Theories, Psychological Plausibility, and the Human/Animal Divide." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1105–1123.
- Francione, Gary. 2008. *Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gaita, Rarymond. 2017. *The Philosopher's Dog*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gruen, Lori. 2015. *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Grimm, Herwig, and Markus. Wild. 2016. *Tierethik zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.
- Hämäläinen, Nora. 2012. "Honour, Dignity and the Realm of Meaning." In *Language, Ethics and Animal Life: Wittgenstein and Beyond*, 179–194. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hermann, Julia. 2015. *On Moral Certainty, Justification and Practice: A Wittgensteinian Perspective*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137447180>.
- Huth, Martin. 2020. "How to Recognize Animals' Vulnerability: Questioning the Orthodoxies of Moral Individualism and Relationalism in Animal Ethics." *Animals* 10 (2): 235.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2006. "Applying Virtue Ethics to Our Treatment of the Other Animals." In *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*, 136–155. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jamieson, Dale. 1983. "Killing Persons and Other Beings." In *Ethics and Animals*, edited by Hugh Miller and William Williams, 135–146. Clifton, NJ: Humana Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2011. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Killoren, D., and R. Streiffer. 2023. "Three and a Half Ways to a Hybrid View in Animal Ethics." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1125–1148.
- Korsgaard, Christine. M. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2018. *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2022. "Valuing Animals, Nature, and Our Own Animal Nature: A Reply to Maclean, Schapiro, and Wallace." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 105: 248–257.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1978. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- May, Todd. 2014. "Moral Individualism, Moral Relationalism, and Obligations to Non-Human Animals." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31 (2): 155–168.
- McDowell, John. 1979. "Virtue and Reason." *The Monist* 62 (3): 331–350.
- McMahan, Jeff. 2005. "Our Fellow Creatures." *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (3/4): 353–380. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25115832>.
- . 2010, September 19. "The Meat Eaters." *The New York Times*. <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/the-meat-eaters/>.
- Midgley, Mary. 1978. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Murdoch, I. 2013. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mulhall, Stephen. 2008. *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Norcross, Alasdair. 2004. Puppies, pigs, and people: Eating meat and marginal cases. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18: 229–245.
- Nussbaum, Martha. C. 2006. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2023. *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- O'Neill, Onora. 1986. "The Power of Example." *Philosophy* 61 (235): 5–29.
- Palmer, Clare. 2010. *Animal Ethics in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Panizza, Silvia. 2022. "The Animals We Eat: Between Attention and Ironic Detachment." *Journal of Animal Ethics* 12 (1): 32–50.
- Pollo, Simone. 2021. *Manifesto per un Animalismo Democratico*. Roma, Italy: Carocci.
- Pleasants, Nigel. 2009. "Wittgenstein and Basic Moral Certainty." *Philosophia* 37 (4): 669. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-009-9198-0>.
- Pluhar, Evelyne. B. 1995. *Beyond Prejudice: The Moral Significance of Human and Nonhuman Animals*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Queloz, Matthieu. 2023. "Ethics Beyond the Limits: New Essays on Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, edited by Sophie Grace Chappell and Marcel van Ackeren." Pages 234–43
- Regan, Tom. 1982. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rachels, James 1990. *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rowlands, Mark. 1997. "Contractarianism and Animal Rights." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14 (3): 235–247.
- . 2012. *Can Animals Be Moral?* New York: Oxford University Press
- Ryder, Richard. 1971. "Experiments on Animals." In *Animals, Men and Morals: An Inquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans*, edited by Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, and John Harris, 1–20. London: Macmillan.
- Sebo, Jeff. 2017. "Agency and Moral Status." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14 (1): 1–22.
- . 2023 "Kantianism for Humans, Utilitarianism for Nonhumans? Yes and No." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1211–1230.
- Singer, Peter. 1975. *Animal Liberation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Steiner, Gary. 2008. *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status, and Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Taylor, Craig. 2019. "Our Fellow Creatures." In *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*, 220–232. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Velleman, J. David. 2004. "Replies to Discussion on 'The Possibility of Practical Reason'." *Philosophical Studies* 121 (3): 277–298.
- . 2009. *How We Get Along*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.sx61dp271>.
- Williams, Bernard. 2011. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 2012. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Wilson, Catherine. 2018. "Moral Authority and the Limits of Philosophy." In *Ethics Beyond the Limits*, 238–250. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1975. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Rev. 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wollheim, R. 1984. *The Thread of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Collected Articles

Article 1: Aspect-Seeing in Animal Research: the Absence of Justice in the Harm-Benefit Analysis.

Sub-research question 1: What are the potentials and the limits of a practice-based approach to animal ethics?

Status: Published in *Transforming Food Systems: Ethics, Innovation and Responsibility* (Conference proceedings EurSafe 2022).

Citation: Linder, E., and Grimm, H., 2022. “36. Aspect-seeing in Animal Research: The Absence of Justice in the Harm-Benefit Analysis.” In *Transforming Food Systems: Ethics, Innovation and Responsibility*, 240–244. Wageningen Academic.

Authorship contribution statement: The original draft was conceptualized by the first and the last author, and was written by the first author. Review and editing were employed by the first and last author. Supervision by the last author. Both authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript. Please refer to the supplementary material for the signed transparency agreement.

Abstract: The Harm-Benefit Analysis (HBA) is a procedure used to assess research protocols involving animals used for scientific purposes on the basis of the 38th article of the Directive 2010/63/EU and corresponding Member States’ legal acts. Such analysis aims at weighing the harms inflicted on the animals with the benefits that can be acquired through their use. The HBA has already faced several criticisms. A major, however often overlooked problem, is its incapacity to deal with problems of justice. This article draws from recent work on “aspect-seeing” to shed light on how the HBA precludes us from meaningfully engaging in discourse about justice and thus prevents us from addressing the unjust treatment of laboratory animals. When engaging in aspect-seeing – like when confronted with Jastrow’s famous rabbit-duck picture – we can intentionally see different aspects of the same object. Reshef Agam-Segal (2014; 2015) noted that different aspects are embedded in different normative frameworks; these, in turn, allow for different discourses and actions. Conversely, if one engages in an HBA, one relies on a particular set of conceptualisations of the animal, e.g. as a “research tool” or “utility receptacle,” which precludes us from meaningfully talking about matters of justice; we struggle to see the animal as something that could deserve justice. Hence, using only the HBA for evaluating animal research forecloses us to draw from meaningful sources of moral evaluation. Animal research shows how we can become captivated by a particular picture of morality, we become, so to speak, morally short-sighted. Captivated by a specific aspect, we lose access to the plurality of values at our disposal, thereby reassuring ourselves that every moral problem has been solved. Aspect-seeing, instead, allows us to grasp such variety by exploring different aspects of the animal and therefore it allows us to attain an adequate picture of what is morally at stake.

Keywords: pluralism, utilitarianism, Wittgensteinian ethics, rabbit-duck.

1 Introduction

The HBA is a procedure required by the European Directive 2010/63 and corresponding legal acts in the Member States in order to assess research protocol involving live animals. Such an analysis intends to weigh the harm done to the animals used against the potential benefit (or educational value etc.) acquired through such research. If the expected benefits outweigh the harms, it is permissible to proceed with the research.

The role of such analysis is that of, broadly speaking, computing the amount of utility gained or lost through the implementation of a particular project (Grimm *et al.*, 2019). The following pages intend to address one of the shortcomings of this analysis. As a matter of fact, the HBA has already faced several criticisms: It is not clear, for instance, what exactly can count as a “benefit” since the vague meaning of the word “benefit” leaves too much room for arbitrary interpretations. Another critique is the inconsistency of standards in the committees that carry out the HBA and advice the authority. In fact, the same research project might be deemed acceptable by one committee and unacceptable by another (e.g. Dresser 1989; 2019; Plous and Herzog, 2001). Furthermore, it is not clear why ethical committee members should be responsible for decisions that seem to depend on the political idiosyncrasies of the committee members. Who is to decide where research effort ought to be directed?

These issues are not intrinsic to the analysis itself. Therefore, for the sake of argument, we will concede that such problems can be solved. Consequently, the structure and the general idea of the HBA can remain intact: only relevant research should be allowed to use animals. On the contrary, there are other issues underlying the analysis itself. It has been noticed, for instance, that while weighing the harms inflicted with the possible benefits, one is comparing goods of a different kind. What goes *in* the calculus is actual pain. What comes *out* is data. Pain is an immediate certainty. Data – on the other hand – has only the potential of being turned into “benefits” (e.g. Grimm, 2015; Eggel and Grimm, 2018). However, even in an ideal world where the HBA might function perfectly well, a problem – which we now turn to – remains. In fact, even if only one animal was sacrificed to achieve an enormous benefit, a moral problem of injustice remains.

2 A problem of justice

We are not committed to a specific definition of justice. Instead, we would like to work with the intuition that in the case of animal research, there is an unfair distribution of harm and benefits: it is not the harmed individual who benefits from the experiment’s results but someone else. Although

animals are intentionally harmed, they do not benefit from the procedure; they do not get, so to speak, compensated – all the more if they are then killed. In utilitarian terms, we may say that utility is transferred from one individual to another, and such a transfer seems *prima facie* unfair. Cases of just harm are usually characterised by the fact that the subject either voluntarily accepts to undergo the procedure or is somehow compensated. Laboratory animals neither volunteer to be experimented upon nor are compensated in any substantial way. Therefore, in the following pages, we will not take into account the extremely rare cases in which animals benefit directly from the procedure. In these cases, the animal is indeed somehow compensated.

One may claim that it is *reasonable* to sacrifice one individual for the majority's sake, but this is not the point. Even though one may find something reasonable and decide to act in a certain way, it would not entail that every moral issue has thereby disappeared. As William James noticed, even if we achieved a utopian society by rendering miserable only one individual for the rest of his life, there would still be a moral problem; harming that specific individual would still seem unfair (James 1891, 333). If we were able to predict, through an HBA, that by sacrificing one individual, we would save millions of people, it might be reasonable to adopt such a line of action, but it would still be unfair for the sacrificed one. Why should *this* specific individual be sacrificed and used as a means and not another one? Such a sacrifice would seem a case of unjust and arbitrary harm.

Such a problem is a recurring theme both in the literary and the western philosophical tradition. For instance, we find it in *The Brother Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky, 2003) or in John Rawls' (Rawls, 1971) critique of utilitarianism where the tension between the greater good and the individual's rights has been already explored in depth. Such a critique is usually put forward to reject utilitarianism as a normative theory. This is not, however, the aim of the present paper.

We would like to resist the temptation to solve an ethical problem by rushing to a solution. Instead, we would like to linger and appreciate what moral issues emerge within a specific situation. The aim here is to explore what is at stake, why do we lose sight of matters of justice when we see through the lenses of the HBA? As a means of exploration we will rely on the Wittgensteinian notion of aspect-seeing as developed by Reshef Agam-Segal.

3 See this rabbit? That's what a duck looks like!

In the *Philosophical Investigation* Wittgenstein dedicated quite a few pages on the notion of "aspect-seeing" (Wittgenstein 2009). The most intuitive way to become acquainted with such a notion is by experiencing it. Recall Jastrow's famous rabbit-duck picture. At first, some see a rabbit, others see a duck. Even if one can switch between the two, one cannot see both the rabbit *and* the duck

simultaneously. Although the object remains the same, we can see it as something and as something else. We see different aspects of it. Agam-Segal (2014; 2015) claims that we see different things because we apply different concepts to the same object.

Before we engage in aspect-seeing, we usually see just one aspect of the picture. Then, suddenly, the other aspect – as Agam-Segal put it – “dawns on us” (2014, 43). We clearly see something that we could not see before. We experience a new meaning as the picture gains new life. After that, we are able to shift from one aspect to the other, and we do so by *contemplating* the object in a *reflective and uncommitted* state (Agam-Segal 2014, 43). We are not committed to saying that the picture truly represents a duck or rabbit. We playfully engage in aspect-seeing by trying out the concepts at our disposal. Such uncommitted and playful exercise is an essential characteristic of aspect-seeing. It prevents us from becoming entrenched by a particular aspect and, therefore, from losing sight of other possible aspects. As a matter of fact, when we see a duck, we cannot see a rabbit; if we were to commit ourselves that *that picture truly is* a duck, we would always see a duck.

Agam-Segal’s account of aspect-seeing is particularly relevant for the present discussion since he claims it is possible to link it with normativity in ethics. Each concept, he notices, is tied to a peculiar normative framework. These normative frameworks are intertwined with practices and discourses that allow for or exclude connections with other concepts. Therefore, by applying a specific concept, different paths become available to us. By committing ourselves to a particular concept or aspect we are warranted in using it or talking about it in a particular way and not in another (Agam-Segal 2014, 43). For example, if we see the picture as a duck, it will make sense to talk about its beak or to use it to illustrate what a duck looks like. Moreover, since committing oneself to a particular aspect precludes us from accessing other aspects, using it as a duck picture would preclude us from using it as a rabbit picture. It does not make sense to say: “Look at this rabbit picture, that’s what a duck looks like!”

4 A research tool, a utility vessel and a patient

Engaging in aspect-seeing can help us see how using only the HBA as a means for evaluating research protocols involving non-human animals precludes us from dealing with the problem of injustice. Moreover, it allows us to become aware of the tendency to fall short in our moral thought in those situations in which we ignore the plurality of values and aspects at our disposal, and we rush towards a justification. As a matter of fact, aspect-seeing allows us to explore the normative frameworks to which a specific conceptualisation of the animal can lead us without committing ourselves to it. Within the case of animal research, we can have access to a multiplicity of aspects of the animal, it is

this fact that generates the moral complexities of such a situation. As Cora Diamond puts it “a laboratory rat is neither a machine nor a person; if it were one or the other, there would be no problem how to draw the boundaries of morality” (Diamond 1991, 346).

Although there are many aspects whose normative frameworks we could explore, for the present purposes, we will explore those aspects upon which the HBA can be meaningfully hinged: the animal as a utility receptacle or a research tool. Both conceptualisations prevent us from meaningfully engaging some instances of moral discourses because in both cases, the value attributed to the animal is something *independent* from the animal itself. The animal becomes something replaceable that serves a function, that has a *right use* but cannot be treated in its *own right*. Our moral grammar about rightness and justice can be used only in a secondary sense. The word “right” is embedded in a different semantic network. We use a tool in the right way when it fits within the proper chain of actions that lead to a set end. Tools are mere means. The same problem goes for utility vessels; we are not interested in where utility is allocated. We are interested in how much such utility can contribute to its maximisation. It does not make sense to be concerned about a specific receptacle since it is not the vessel’s value we are interested in. On the contrary, if we were to conceptualise the laboratory animal with Tom Regan’s notion of subject- of-a-life and inherent value (Regan 2004), we would be allowed to meaningfully speak about the animal as a right bearer and as something that can be treated with fairness and justice. However, the latter conceptualisation is incompatible with the HBA since the *ratio* of such analysis presupposes that what is of ultimate value is the maximisation of utility. This entails that the individual’s rights can come into consideration only secondarily if the principle of maximising utility is satisfied. Utility is not thought of as something that belongs intrinsically to someone. As a matter of fact, that “someone” is not relevant were it not for the fact that it can “hold” utility. But by being conceptualised as a recipient or a tool something loses the possibility of being meaningfully thought of as something that can deserve a just treatment.

By conceptualising the animal as a tool or a utility receptacle, one loses the possibility of using the word “right” in its primary sense. That is, within a discourse that includes concepts like “justice” or “merit.” In this sense, matters of justice become elusive when we conceptualise an object as a tool or as a utility receptacle. As a result, we deprive ourselves of the proper hinge to talk about justice. Using the HBA as the only means of evaluating research protocols involving non-human animals makes us blind to some element of our moral landscape because it relies on the commitment to a particular aspect.

5 Conclusions

Aspect-seeing allows us to become aware of those aspects we lost sight of by trying out different concepts when dealing with complex moral problems. This allows us to see on what concepts a particular justificatory discourse is hinged upon and to show how the sole use of the HBA is indeed somewhat factionous since it relies on a particular aspect of the animal that does not allow us to engage in meaningful discourse about justice. This is, in a given context, understandable; however, it would be wrong to claim that any problem of justice has thereby disappeared. The fact that we find some sort of justification does not mean that every moral problem is solved. Again, a reasonable choice might not be a just choice. It is indeed sufficient to see the animal in a different light, e.g. as a subject-of-a-life, to see the problem again, as something that ought to be treated justly. We can uncover the contingent *status* of our current ways of conceptualising animals by engaging in aspect-seeing. A reflection upon the contingency and precariousness of our justificatory tools allows us to broaden our moral landscape by opening up the possibility of making other conceptualisations available. Engagement in aspect-seeing outlines itself as an important attitude of the moral agent who seriously wishes to contribute to a democratic and pluralistic debate over morally complex issues. Furthermore, we hope to have shown how applied ethics can profit from Wittgensteinian thinking. In fact, although there is indeed a need for further research, such thinking can provide helpful insights to explore moral complex issues such as the intricacies surrounding the HBA and animal ethics in general.

References

- Agam-Segal, Reshef. 2014. "When Language Gives Out: Conceptualization, and Aspect-Seeing as a Form of Judgement." *Metaphilosophy* 45 (1): 41–68.
- . 2015. "Aspect-Perception as a Philosophical Method." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 4 (1): 93–121.
- Diamond, Cora. 1991. "Experimenting on Animals: A Problem in Ethics." In *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. 2003. *The Brothers Karamazov*. London: Penguin.
- Dresser, Rebecca. 1989. "Developing Standards in Animal Research." *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 194: 1184–91.
- . 2019. "Putting the Ethical Principles in Practice." In *Principles of Animal Research Ethics*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp and David DeGrazia. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Eggel, Matthias, and Herwig Grimm. 2018. "Necessary, but Not Sufficient: The Benefit Concept in the Project Evaluation of Animal Research in the Context of Directive 2010/63/EU." *Animals* 8 (3): 34.
- European Commission. 2010. *Directive 2010/63/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 September 2010 on the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific Purposes*. Brussels.
- Grimm, Herwig. 2015. "Turning Apples into Oranges? The Harm–Benefit Analysis and How to Take Ethical Considerations into Account." *Alternatives to Laboratory Animals* 43 (2): 22–24.
- Grimm, Herwig, I. Anna S. Olsson, and Peter Sandøe. 2019. "Harm–Benefit Analysis—What Is the Added Value? A Review of Alternative Strategies for Weighing Harms and Benefits as Part of the Assessment of Animal Research." *Laboratory Animals* 53 (1): 17–27.
- James, William. 1892. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." *The International Journal of Ethics* 1 (3): 330–54.
- Plous, Scott, and Harold Herzog. 2001. "Reliability of Protocol Reviews for Animal Research." *Science* 293: 608–09.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Regan, Tom. 2004. *The Case for Animal Rights*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wittgenstein, 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Rev. 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Article 2: What is Wrong with Eating Pets? Wittgensteinian Animal Ethics and its Need for Empirical Data

Sub-research question 1: What are the potentials and the limits of a practice-based approach to animal ethics?

Citation: Linder, E, and Grimm, H., 2023. “What Is Wrong with Eating Pets? Wittgensteinian Animal Ethics and Its Need for Empirical Data.” *Animals* 13, no. 17: 2747. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13172747>

Authorship contribution statement: The original draft was conceptualized and written by the first author. Review and editing were employed by the first and last author. Supervision by the last author. Both authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript. Please refer to the supplementary material for the signed transparency agreement.

Abstract: Wittgensteinian approaches to animal ethics highlight the significance of practical concepts like “pet,” “patient,” or “companion” in shaping our understanding of how we should treat non-human animals. For Wittgensteinian animal ethicists, moral principles alone cannot ground moral judgments about our treatment of animals. Instead, moral reflection must begin with acknowledging the practical relations that tie us to animals. Morality emerges within practical contexts. Context-dependent conceptualisations form our moral outlook. In this paper, we argue that Wittgensteinians should, for methodological reasons, pay more attention to empirical data from the social sciences such as sociology, psychology or anthropology. Such data can ground Wittgensteinians’ moral inquiry and thereby render their topical views more dialectically robust.

Keywords: Wittgensteinian ethics; animal ethics; empirical data; empirical ethics.

1 Introduction

Since the so-called “empirical turn” in bioethics (see e.g., Borry, Schotsmans and Dierickx 2005; Leget et al. 2009; Hurst 2010; Winther 2022), ethicists have increasingly appreciated the value of empirical data from the social sciences. Such data can provide guidance in dealing with applied ethical problems. It has become apparent that universal moral principles alone cannot adequately accommodate the complexities of concrete, practical situations (Flynn 2022). Discussing ethical solutions from a purely theoretical standpoint is not enough. If we want to provide meaningful criticism and advice, we must engage directly with the attitudes, values, and complexities inherent in each ethical scenario.

How exactly can empirical data from the social sciences contribute to ethical reflection? Bioethicists have proffered a variety of answers to this question. Some argue that ethical judgments should be guided by principles; empirical data can only help contextually refining these judgments (Caplan 1980, 25–26). Others deny that principles are helpful (e.g., Davies, Ives and Dunn 2015) and place more emphasis on contextual and empirical factors (for an overview, see Flynn 2022). As the debate has developed, intermediate positions have emerged in which empirical data inform ethical reflection to varying degrees (for a systematic review, see Davies, Ives and Dunn 2015).

Since there is no consensus on which of the above stances is correct, we think that it is, at least, important for applied ethicists to make their position explicit by (1) disclosing their theoretical assumptions and (2) clarifying which sort of connection their view has to empirical data from the social sciences. Should empirical data merely support ethical judgments by refining principles or should it be the very ground of moral judgments? Indeed, if one rejects the idea that universal principles ground moral judgments, then right and wrong must be determined relative to context. And, contexts are properly explored through empirical inquiry, that is, through situated investigations that generate useful data. For example, by conducting focus groups or qualitative interviews.

Animal ethics has witnessed a shift towards greater use of empirical data. Nonetheless, the debate has traditionally been dominated by so-called “orthodox approaches” (Aaltola and Hadley 2014; Monsó and Grimm 2019). What is distinctive of advocates of orthodox approaches – be they deontologists (Regan 2004; Francione 2010) or utilitarians (Singer 1975; Sebo 2020; Višak 2020) – is that they employ moral principles established a priori that serve as a point of reference for moral evaluations. Even if some advocates of orthodox approaches increasingly consider empirical data from the social sciences, they still discern what is right or wrong from moral principles. Orthodox animal ethicists make use of empirical data hold that what the folk think is the right way to treat animals is only

relevant as a means to implement the right course of action (e.g., by nudging them in the right direction (Kasperbauer 2017, 176–181). Some advocates of orthodox approaches might suggest that, given our psychological dispositions towards animals, we should favour a particular moral theory, one that accommodates our tendency to favour humans (Fisher, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023). Nonetheless, the relevant mindset remains: we first identify the correct theory (with associated principles) and only then do we apply it in the most effective way. As we will see, the connection between empirical data and animal ethics has, to date, only taken into consideration the orthodox position. Such is, for example, the stance taken by Kirsten Persson and David Shaw in their groundbreaking article “Empirical Methods in Animal Ethics” where they systematise how orthodox accounts would benefit from empirical data from both the natural and social sciences (Persson and Shaw 2015).

However, orthodox approaches had their critics: Wittgensteinian ethicists. The latter criticised the former for being reductionistic and rationalistic (Monsó and Grimm 2019). Wittgensteinians emphasise the inextricable link between morality and our form of life; the latter being “the intertwining of culture, worldview, and language” (Glock 1996, 124). They argue that any moral problem is best understood by considering the context within which it emerges. Every morally relevant concept and every morally relevant action has its origin in the network of language games and practices that constitute our forms of life. Morality cannot be understood from an external point of view nor can it be reduced to a set of moral principles established a priori as e.g., utilitarian claim to do (cf. Singer 1975). Rather, the meaning of each moral concept should be understood through its use in different practices, in different language games.

Like so-called anti-theorists (Christensen 2021, 21–22), Wittgensteinians argue that a moral judgment about some situation “cannot be coded in explicit and general principles” (Christensen 2021, 20). Rather, it “involve[s] a complicated understanding of the good life” (Christensen 2021, 20). And such an understanding is always situated within a context, it is formed through the plurality of concepts that constitute our forms of life. The promise that our moral judgments might be enriched beyond classical uses of deontological and consequentialist principles has prompted something of a revolution in ethical studies in the wake of Wittgenstein, (e.g., Agam-Segal and Dain 2017; De Mesel and Kuusela 2019) and an interest towards applied problems in ethics in general, (e.g., Salskov, Beran and Hämäläinen 2022) and animal ethics in particular (e.g., Diamond 1978; Crary 2010). However, in animal ethics, little has been said about the relationship between Wittgensteinian approaches and social sciences.¹

¹ Hannah Winther’s recent work (2022) – inspired by the philosophy of Cora Diamond – is an exception.

Note that our aim in this paper is not to settle the question of whether Wittgensteinian approaches indeed provide a better understanding of moral problems than orthodox approaches. There is ongoing debate in this regard. We aim, rather, to show that, given their peculiar approach, Wittgensteinians should make extensive use of empirical data. Indeed, the fact that Wittgensteinians ground moral judgments in our forms of life (rather than in principles) raises the question of how they should interpret data from the social sciences. When sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists describe how a community perceives animals, for example, they are describing the concepts that constitute their form of life. They can, for example, show how animals are conceptualised and what sort of morally relevant relationships with them are *de facto* present. If so, then it seems natural to draw from the social sciences when engaging in ethical reflections and discussions. However, in animal ethics, Wittgensteinians have so far only explored the concepts we live by through discussions of the work of poets and novelists (e.g., Crary 2007, 2016; Diamond 1978, 1991, 2001; Mulhall 2021; Taylor 2019) or by drawing on anecdotal experiences and on their own preconceptions of what an animal is (e.g., Taylor 2019). We contend that this is not sufficient. Hence, our primary aim here is to argue that Wittgensteinians should, for methodological reasons, rely on the social sciences if they wish to present a robust alternative to the orthodox approach. That is, they should interpret empirical data about the specific contexts and situations they are interested in as the starting point for any ethical reflection.

In Sections 2 and 3 of this paper, we will make explicit the Wittgensteinians' peculiar approach to ethics by exploring how the orthodox and the Wittgensteinian approaches substantiate moral judgments. Wittgensteinians, as opposed to orthodox approaches, consider different sorts of reasons to be relevant when justifying moral judgements. For example, the fact that an animal is a pet gives us already a reason to act in a certain way (without the need to invoke any principles). The fact that we think about some animals in this way is taken to be a reason for why it is wrong to eat them. Asking whether it is wrong to eat them is seen as an ill-guided question. This will show how Wittgensteinians consider descriptions of how we *de facto* already think as bearing a normative potential.

In Sections 4 and 5, we argue that social sciences can inform us with relevant descriptions about how we already think about moral issues and conclude that a systematic inquiry into how people actually think about animals can provide a more substantial foundation for Wittgensteinian ethical reflection than does the anecdotal approach they have used so far. Wittgensteinian reflections should not shy away from engaging in interdisciplinary work with social scientists. Indeed, the former's perspective

provides a profound insight in the work of social scientists: the data they collect is normatively relevant.

In Section 6, we briefly address some possible worries such as the concern that Wittgensteinian approaches lead to relativism. Even if our paper is not aimed at defending a Wittgensteinian position we think it is important not to trivialise their approach as it could indeed provide a more context-sensitive approach to animal ethics.

2 What's Wrong with Eating Pets? Orthodox versus Wittgensteinian Answers

In this section, we take a first step towards defending our claim that Wittgensteinian animal ethicists should rely on empirical data from the social sciences to develop a substantial foundation for their ethical reflections. This step is grounded in the idea—held by the Wittgensteinians and reflected in the way they support their judgments—that descriptions of how we already think about animals carry a normative potential. To better elucidate this idea, we will contrast the way in which Wittgensteinians and utilitarians—one of the dominant positions in orthodox animal ethics—ground ethical judgments.

Consider the following question: “What’s wrong with eating pets?” A utilitarian (e.g., Singer 1975; John and Sebo 2020; Višak 2022) might respond: “Eating pets is wrong because one must kill the pet to eat it and this would cause, on balance, more harm than good in the world.”² It is important to note that utilitarians mainly give two reasons for why eating pets is wrong:

1. We should adhere to the principle of maximising overall happiness (or pleasure or well-being).
2. Non-human animals are sentient beings.

These reasons are aimed at supporting the claim that eating pets is wrong. They are aimed at justifying the utilitarian’s above answer: the utilitarian is justified in holding that it is wrong to eat a pet because they can give us these two reasons. Since these reasons justify the morality of a judgment we will call them justificatory reasons. Note that two different claims are being made in the above case.

1. Reason 1 involves a normative claim. It concerns how we ought to act: maximise happiness.
2. Reason 2 involves a descriptive claim. The fact that a pet is a sentient being describes how the world is. It tells us a putative fact.

² In this example we are assuming that killing the animal would bring about the highest amount of harm. Hence, e.g., we assume that (1) the harm inflicted to the animal would not outweigh the pleasure derived from eating it and that (2) there are alternatives to eating an animal that would bring about better consequences.

The fact expressed in 2 is normatively inert, provided we do not have a principle instructing our behaviour. This principle need not be the utilitarian one which we have used as an example. It might be a deontological principle that prohibits treating animals as means to an end (Regan 2004; Francione 2010). In any event, the point is that, once we know that the animal is sentient, we must still look for a principle telling us what the right (or wrong) thing to do would be. We do not have a moral reason to refrain from eating the pet if there is no principle that informs us about the right way to act. Once we accept that we should maximise happiness, we can accept that the fact of sentience is a reason not to harm the pet. Being sentient is, then, a reason that justifies our action in a morally relevant way. But, this is only because we hold to a prior moral principle. The fact that we are dealing with a pet does not provide us with any justificatory reason over and above the fact of sentience. What is morally relevant is that we are dealing with a sentient being. Whether it is a pet, vermin, or a farmed animal is *per se* irrelevant.³ In utilitarianism as in other orthodox approaches, the animal that we encounter in particular situations is, in a sense, reduced to an impoverished entity detached from any practical context, be it a “being with interest” (Singer 1975), a “subject-of-a-life” (Regan 2004), “kin” (Steiner 2008), or a “fellow creature” (Korsgaard 2018). In these approaches the various authors seem to look for the animal *per se*. That is, the essence of the animal that we encounter in every context and to which moral principles hold us responsible. And the way to identify what that animal is, typically, consists in a scientific inquiry about its sentience or other cognitive capacities which, in turn, allow us to determine whether it has the relevant intrinsic properties to be included in the moral community (Delon 2015).

Wittgensteinians might respond to the question, “What’s wrong with eating pets?” by remarking: “What’s wrong with you? A pet is not something to eat!” For the Wittgensteinian, it is crucial that we are dealing with a pet and not merely with a generic sentient being. The Wittgensteinian argues that we should not eat our pets because they are our pets. Saying that they are our pets is already a justificatory reason as it points out at the shared understanding of what “pet” means i.e., how some use such term in a form of life. For the Wittgensteinian, reminding that the animal is a pet should be sufficient, and a demand for further reason is, to some extent, an inappropriate question. However, it is not clear how describing an animal in a certain way counts as a justification. So, on what principle does the Wittgensteinian ground “being a pet” as a justificatory reason?

An advocate of the orthodox approach would claim that all the Wittgensteinian is doing is explaining how the world already is. The Wittgensteinian is saying something like “we humans have this sort of

³ It is worth noticing that, within a specific context a utilitarian might say that hurting a pet causes an indirect harm to the owner, whereas hurting a pest would probably maximise the happiness among people. So, overall, more happiness would come from hurting the pest.

practice that we call ‘pet-keeping’ where we take care of animals and do not eat them.” The orthodox ethicist might argue that the Wittgensteinian is merely providing an explanatory reason, that is, a reason that explains why people do not eat their pets. People do not eat their pets because what “being a pet” means for them entails not eating the pet. People have a form of life that makes it abhorrent to eat their pets. But, the orthodox ethicist might argue, this leaves open the question of whether people really should not eat their pets. Wittgensteinians are simply pointing at how the world (descriptively) is, but they have no (normative) principle that instructs them how to act (McMahan 2005, 376). In other words, the orthodox ethicist is asking for further reasons.

However, the need for further reasons and the appeal to universalizable principles is precisely what Wittgensteinians dispute. They refuse to reduce our moral life to a set of principles that everybody has to abide by. As we will see, for Wittgensteinians, the wrongness that stems from eating a pet cannot be reduced to the violation of a principle and to the fact that a pet is a sentient being. What ultimately makes a reason a justificatory reason is a particular concept we live by within a particular form of life. For Wittgensteinians, moral judgment should not be limited to a “shallow” and “moralistic tone” (Diamond 1978, 468–469) which is conveyed through principles. It should, instead, allow us to show aspects of a particular form of life: that is, it should take into account the nuances that differentiate the variety of concepts through which agents make sense of the world.

The concept of a “pet” cannot be disentangled into separate evaluative and descriptive components; rather, it carries a particular meaning that those engaged in the practice of pet-keeping can aptly grasp. Thus, questioning why it is wrong to eat a pet means to address questions that don’t need to be asked (cf. Agam-Segal 2019, 56; Diamond 1997) as they lead us to engage what Bernard Williams calls “one thought too many” (Williams 1981, 19). Diamond, for example, claims that with these questions one “runs a risk of leaving those fundamental features of our relationship to [pets] which are involved in our not eating them”⁴ (Diamond 1978, 467). The mere acknowledgment that we are dealing with a pet already encompasses an understanding of how we should treat them. One might dispute that we are dealing with a pet, but the very fact that one acknowledges that we are dealing with a pet comes with an understanding of how we treat pets.

The same line of criticism applies as well to deontological approaches, even though they seem closer to Wittgensteinians than utilitarians. Indeed, deontologists can formulate obligations specific to the fact that the animal is a pet. Claire Palmer argues, for instance, that we have obligations towards domesticated animals which differ from those towards wild animals due to the particular relationships

⁴ In the original text Diamond makes this point about human beings, but the same considerations apply to pets.

we establish with the former (Palmer 2010, 40). Along these lines, one could argue that we also have specific obligations towards pets and therefore claim that also deontologists make reference to concepts such as “pet.” The primary difference with Wittgensteinian approaches, as will be clarified in the following sections, lies in their distinct meta-ethical approach. As pointed out by Alice Crary and Lori Gruen, deontologists still adhere to a strict distinction between facts and values, deriving our normativity from universalizable principles (Crary and Gruen 2022, 97–98). Moreover, any obligation we have towards pets will depend on previously established principles—such as the “respect principle”—which apply universally to all beings in virtue of the fact that they are e.g., “subjects-of-a-life” (Regan 2004). Therefore, if we have special obligations towards a pet, they will still be grounded on universalizable principles and on a conception of the animal as an animal *per se*.

In other words, the reasons why we should not harm a pet are established in both deontological and utilitarian accounts by referring to a principle whose violation determines the wrongness of an action, and, ultimately, to the fact that the being in question is sentient. However, for Wittgensteinians, this is not the case. The wrongness of eating a pet can only be understood if one is raised in a community where the practice of pet-keeping holds particular significance. We will argue that this peculiar understanding of ethics means that Wittgensteinians should employ empirical data as a ground for moral argumentation.

We have explicated how the orthodox approach grounds justificatory reasons in principles and how Wittgensteinians ground them in people’s forms of life. We now flesh out Wittgensteinian ethics to show how simply being a pet can serve as a justificatory reason. That is, how they derive normative claims from a description of how people already think.

3 Morality in a Form of Life: Anti-Reductionism and Description in Wittgensteinian Moral Thought

For Wittgensteinians, the wrongness of eating a pet, understood through the concept “pet” and the practice of “pet keeping” cannot be reduced to a prohibition on harming sentient beings to maximise happiness. Instead, these notions demonstrate meaningful ways in which we can understand our relationships with animals. There are two aspects of the Wittgensteinian approach that highlight how normativity stems from our forms of life. Firstly, Wittgensteinian ethical inquiry is anti-reductionist. Such anti-reductionism can be understood in two ways:

1. Our understanding of morality is not reduced to a set of principles.

2. The animals we encounter within our form of life – such as “pets,” “patients,” and “companions” – are not reduced to beings with morally relevant properties. Wittgensteinians do not reduce pets to animals *per se* (the sum of morally relevant properties).

Secondly, Wittgensteinian ethical inquiry is a descriptive approach to ethics. There is no overarching and universal principle, criterion, or theory that can ground moral judgments and provide ultimate solutions. There is rather a plurality of morally relevant concepts that the ethicist should highlight and describe.

Wittgensteinians’ anti-reductionism and descriptivism are grounded in the idea that morality is always constituted within a specific form of life. That is, within the “intertwining of culture, world-view and language” (Glock 1996, 124) that shape our understanding of the world. Indeed, what we come to understand as moral is always shaped within a particular context through language games. This means that the concepts that we understand as moral gain their meaning through the use of terms within particular contexts and situations. Any morally sound judgment can only be established within the boundaries of practical and linguistic activities. Understanding what is wrong with eating pets must come with an understanding of what it means to live a specific form of life where pets are involved. Paraphrasing Rorty, Diamond states that “[m]oral concern is something we have not as rational beings or as animals with certain capacities but as members of communities within which this or that language of moral deliberation has taken shape” (Diamond 1991b, 39).

Our understanding of morality – as constituted in a form of life – becomes the starting point for comprehending what is morally justified or unjustified. We can only understand how moral judgments are justified by considering how meaning is constructed within a community. People living in different communities come to understand the world differently as they engage in distinct practices and language usage. There is a “close relationship between the people and their environment and the delicate adjustment of their lives to that environment has come to be encoded into other grammar of their language” (Lee 1992, 36; see also Sealey and Charles 2013, 487). Indeed, this is reflected in how animals are classified and described (cf. Hunn 1982; Dransart 2002; Cockleman 2011). The way a Scottish fisherman from the 12th century perceives the world will vary significantly from a contemporary Italian animal ethics researcher’s perspective. The meaning of “fish” for them differs. To the former, comprehending what a fish is involves understanding the practice of fishing. The fish might be viewed as a source of sustenance or as a sea dweller. Conversely, for the Italian animal ethicist, a “fish” might simply be a biological being, a subject-of-a-life deserving respect, or an ethically controversial source of protein. When we assert that their form of life differs, we imply that

their outlook on the world diverges, and such disparity manifests in the contrasting ways these individuals engage with and have learned how to use the concept of “fish.” By engaging in different language-games, the meaning of the term varies due to its different usage.

3.1 Against Reduction to Theory

In general terms, Wittgensteinians maintain that the source of moral judgements is more complex than the orthodox approach allows. Following the motto “I’ll teach you differences” (Shakespeare 2001), Wittgensteinians urge us to pay attention to the multitude of conceptualisations that shape and enrich our moral deliberations. Oskari Kuusela, for instance, states that we should resist the idea that there are some “distinctively moral words or concepts [. . .] necessary for morality” (Kuusela 2022, 85). We need not turn to principles to understand the rightness or wrongness of an action. Instead, the rightness or wrongness of an action is already embedded in ordinary language and practical concepts. As already mentioned, in line with anti-theorists (e.g., Christensen 2017, 176–179), Wittgensteinians resist the idea that principles can provide an exhaustive account of the morally relevant reasons characterising a particular context. As Anne-Marie Christensen puts it, these thinkers turn their attention towards the fine-tuned description of the many ways in which moral considerations arise in human life, pointing to the gap between the simplicity of the picture of moral thinking offered by moral theories and the startling complexity of considerations and influences drawn on in actual moral practice (Christensen 2017, 177).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that theory and principles are not necessarily repudiated. Some authors lower the relevance of theory and principles in our life by claiming that they do not have ultimate authority over our decisions, even if they can be helpful in clarifying the issues at stake. Moral theories may not provide “the most important form of understanding of our moral life,” but they can still provide “forms of general orientation” (Christensen 2021, 208). In other words, our actions are informed by *prima facie* justificatory reasons rather than decisive justificatory reasons. These *prima facie* reasons count in favour of or against any given moral judgement but cannot provide us with a categorical answer. Principles would then function as *prima facie* reasons that provide us guidance in seeing what is at stake, but cannot provide us with an ultimate solution with certainty.

3.2 Against Reduction of Animals to Animals Per Se

Wittgensteinians’ focus on the complexities of moral practices highlights a second way in which the orthodox account deflects us from our moral lives. Viewing animals as sentient beings oversimplifies the complexity of how we encounter animals. Orthodox approaches (specifically, utilitarianism) do not explore questions like “what does it mean to be a pet owner?” or “what kind of special relationship emerges between pet and pet owner?” Instead, they dissolve these differences, which arguably enrich

our diverse experiences. The pest we want to get rid of, the wild animals we admire, and the pets we cuddle are substituted for an animal *per se*. But, we cannot and do not encounter animals *per se* in our forms of life. Lamenting this impoverishment of our moral life, Diamond writes:” It is a mark of the shallowness of these discussions [. . .] that the only tool used in them to explain what differences in treatment are justified is the appeal to the capacities of the beings in question” (Diamond 1978, 468).

Indeed, framing oneself as a “pet-owner” rather than a “livestock-owner” comes with significantly different connotations, connotations that the notion of being a “sentient-being owner” does not seem to capture. The reduction of a pet to a sentient-being is relevant for this discussion because it comes with an impoverished understanding of meaning and normativity. The concept “pet” has an irreducible meaning for the relationships shaped through practices and language games specific to our forms of life. We learn what a pet is within special circumstances. This learning is built on playful and loving practices similar to those we enjoy with family members. We allow them in our house, we take care of them, and we show them love and affection (Diamond 1971, 469). These intricate networks of practices implicitly inform us how we ought to behave. They hold deep significance for us because they constitute part of our form of life and our understanding of ourselves as human beings (Diamond 1978, 470). The reasons why it is wrong to eat one’s pet cannot be encompassed by the judgement that eating a sentient being is wrong. In fact, utilitarians cannot *a priori* exclude that we should eat our pets in certain circumstances. There will be circumstances where it is actually morally required by the principle of maximising overall happiness. If one’s pet dog were struck by lightning but still edible, then utilitarians cannot dismiss the idea that we ought to eat it (if doing so would maximise happiness) (Diamond 1991a, 374). The Wittgensteinian would argue that there is something deeply disturbing about eating one’s pet, something that is absent when eating a farmed animal. Both might be wrong, but the former is worse. There might be situations where the Wittgensteinians would concede that eating one’s pet is a reasonable thing to do but that would not make it a good action.

For Wittgensteinians, eating one’s pet can be thought of as an attack on the way we make sense of the world. This is why “if we call an animal that we are fattening for the table a pet, we are,” at best, “making a crude joke” (Diamond 1978, 470). If we get rid of the concept “pet,” then we lose a number of justificatory reasons, reasons that utilitarianism cannot account for. Reasons that matter deeply to the agents involved in the situation and shape the agents’ moral understandings of the world.

3.3 Wittgensteinians' Descriptive Proclivity

It is possible to characterise Wittgensteinian ethics as descriptive owing to its antireductionism (Christensen 2017, 2021; Härmäläinen 2021). We cannot reduce our moral understanding to a principle and we cannot reduce a pet to an animal *per se*. We are, then, confronted with a plurality of moral concepts and moral reasons. There is no ultimate guide for decision-making and action. Wittgenstein claimed that “[p]hilosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it” (Wittgenstein 2009, § 124). Ethicists can dedicate themselves to “assembling what we have long been familiar with” (Wittgenstein 2009, § 109). They can do this by exploring how what already matters can be applied in different situations. They might show us that the animals we eat cannot be reduced to livestock or food, because they could be also meaningfully described as companions or wild animals to which we owe some reverence and respect. The ethicist’s job becomes that of someone who helps others to understand and reshape the world they perceive by making explicit the way they conceptualise the animal.

In sum, anti-reductionism and descriptivism motivate Wittgensteinians to reject the orthodox move of conferring normativity to reasons by means of principles. They understand our form of life as being the entwinement of practices, language, and meaning. This entwinement constitutes the ground of meaningful ethical discourse. It provides a theoretical framework that demands that we engage in a description of how we already conceptualise the world. These conceptualisations constitute the grounds for justification. They provide us with a much richer understanding of morality than a reduction to principle can allow.

As mentioned, Wittgensteinians might claim as follows: “A pet is not something to eat!” For Wittgensteinians, this claim itself provides a justificatory reason for why eating pets is wrong as it reminds us of a fundamental way in which we understand our relationship with pets. The irreducibility of the many reasons stemming from our forms of life is why “we do not eat our pets” is not merely an explanatory reason. It is what warrants treating descriptions as normative.

In the next section, we aim to show how social scientists can substantiate Wittgensteinian moral inquiry. In other words, we suggest what sort of empirical data Wittgensteinians can use to ground their moral judgments. We also argue that Wittgensteinians should do this if they wish to cogently address important moral issues.

4 Empirical Data for Ethical Guidance

In this section, we discuss how the social sciences can contribute to the Wittgensteinian approach to animal ethics. We provide a very general overview, which should help to ground an initial understanding of the issue. It is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, social sciences like sociology, anthropology, and psychology are diverse, varying in methodologies, fields of inquiry, and theoretical frameworks. We can nevertheless recognise the type of data that is valuable in this context.

To make our case, we draw on insights in Persson and Shaw's paper "Empirical Methods in Animal Ethics" (Persson and Shaw 2015) which already discussed how empirical data from both natural and social sciences can inform orthodox approaches to animal ethics. Their classification regarding the significance of social science data is of particular interest as they identify six ways in which empirical data can contribute to ethical decision-making (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858–859). We shall focus on the most argumentatively salient three:⁵

1. Data about reasoning and moral beliefs held by agents involved in a specific practice (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858–859)
2. Data about concrete examples of situations that can make "ethics more context sensitive or realistic" (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858–859)
3. Data about moral issues specific to a practice that has been overlooked by extant moral theories (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858–859)

Regarding 1, Persson and Shaw stress the importance of knowing about people's opinions and beliefs: "without the knowledge of people's awareness of the problem, there is no starting point for rules or guidelines" (Persson and Shaw 2015, 857). Things like principles might be "too abstract" (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858). It is, then, "unlikely that people are willing and able to stick to them in their context-dependent everyday life decisions" (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858).

Regarding 2 and 3, Persson and Shaw argue that including such data in ethical discussions enables animal ethicists to ask more refined and precise questions. Persson and Shaw highlight the shift from broad inquiries like "does it matter whether their suffering can be compared to ours?" (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858) to more focused considerations like: "is it morally acceptable what we do in line with our norms/laws to those creatures which certainly do suffer?" (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858).

⁵ Indeed, these authors claimed as well that empirical data from social sciences can be used for enhancing the contextual relevance and realism of ethics, describing factual information relevant to normative arguments and demonstrating the ethical dimensions of science, technologies, or organizations (Persson and Shaw 2015, 856). However as these are not strictly relevant for the present argument, we will not discuss them.

They also point out that “qualitative data about people’s opinions could [. . .] point to potential ethical issues” when it comes to aspects of human-animal interaction that have yet to be considered (Persson and Shaw 2015, 857). Interviewing individuals engaged in specific moral contexts might uncover issues that moral theorists have overlooked. Such interviews could, for example, reveal conflicts between wildlife and humans, or conflicts within animal communities that ethical theorists have not anticipated. Persson and Shaw’s claims are sound and in line with the views of a growing number of philosophers who suggest that:

1. We should adjust moral theory to make it more realistic (e.g., Fisher, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023).
2. It does not make sense to develop a practical philosophy that ignores our psychological dispositions (e.g., Flanagan 1991, Fisher, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023).

If we want to implement norms, then we must seriously consider these two suggestions. However, proponents of such views are largely still aligned with the orthodox approach to animal ethics. They establish a set of ethical principles that tell us what is the right thing to do. They then proceed to try to find the most effective way to implement those principles (Kasperbauer 2017, 176–181). In other words, they start from established moral principles, rather than from our forms of life, to secure what is morally relevant. They might claim that “there is the danger of moral relativism if context-sensitivity is overrated” (Persson and Shaw 2015, 858).

Wittgensteinians would respond that context sensitivity cannot be overrated. It is the very ground that makes it possible to establish sensible moral discourse. Only concepts and norms that are already present at the moment of the inquiry constitute justifying reasons in moral discourse since the acquisition of new concepts takes time and involves the prolonged engagement of an agent in a practice. Ethical judgments should be grounded in the concepts that agents adopt, concepts like “pet,” “companion,” and “patient” etc. This involves delving into the normative structure of forms of life (e.g., the practice of keeping pets). This is how the social sciences can grant Wittgensteinians a more comprehensive and rigorous understanding of their topic. In fact, we contend that – given their approach to morality – Wittgensteinians can interpret these data as prescriptive, as affording justifying reasons.

5 Wittgensteinians and the Social Sciences

We might say that the social sciences can add meat to the bones of the animal per se. This can be done by describing what sorts of animals and what sort of norms can be found in any given context.

Are we dealing with pets or patients? Is it wild or liminal life? And, what follows from this? The social sciences might provide the justifying reasons that Wittgensteinians claim the orthodox approach precludes. Qualitative data from a particular context would provide the Wittgensteinians the very concepts upon which to develop their ethical reflections. For example, social scientists might show us that animals are seen, e.g., as companions or as patients in certain contexts. These animals are treated in a way that the notion of “sentient being” cannot properly describe. Indeed, every kind of practice prompts the need to gather data ad hoc, as Wittgensteinians hold that the meaning of concepts and words varies with their use, and therefore, with the different practices.

As mentioned, Wittgensteinians stress the role that context-dependent conceptualisations play in our moral life. They have also provided examples of which sort of concepts underpin our moral comprehension of the world. These might be concepts like “humanity” (Crary 2016; Diamond 1978, 1991b; Gaita 2000; Mulhall 2021), “pet” (Diamond 1978; 1991a), or “fellow creature” (Diamond 1978, Taylor 2019). However, when it comes to animal ethics, Wittgensteinians have not reached their conclusions through systematic and empirically informed analysis. They claim that concepts like “humanity,” “pet,” and “fellow creature” help us understand aspects of our moral life. Yet, they remain ambiguous about (1) the extent of the consensus surrounding these concepts, and (2) the varying interpretations of them. That is, they did not show who holds these concepts, in which contexts they are employed nor whether they are understood in the same way by everyone.

Mostly, Wittgensteinians rely on literature and poetry to paint an imaginative (albeit rich) understanding of the relevant concepts. Diamond, for example, uses Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* to illustrate how we understand the concept of being human. Although we might accept that poetry and literature can provide a nuanced understanding of morality (see e.g., Crary 2007; Nussbaum 2012) we contend that this is not sufficient to ground substantial Wittgensteinian ethical reflection. Indeed, the concepts that an author explores might not appropriately describe everyone’s understanding. Nor are they necessarily appropriate for every group of agents in different contexts.

For example, Wittgensteinians themselves do not share the same understanding of “pet.” Diamond argues that we understand what a “pet” is because we let them into our houses (Diamond 1978). Instead, when discussing the difference between our relationship with people with cognitive disabilities and our relationship with pets, Taylor, another Wittgensteinian, claims that we clothe them but not our pets, seat them at the dinner table next to us and not place a bowl on the floor for them, they live in the house with us, not in a kind of kennel in the yard (Taylor 2019, 224–225).

Indeed, some people believe that the definition of “pet” does not entail their residing indoors. For instance, besides those who confine their dogs and cats mainly to the outdoors, there are people who keep horses or chickens as pets, whose presence in houses and flats designed for human residence would cause significant trouble.

We think that the lack of a systematic inquiry into moral concepts is a significant shortcoming of current Wittgensteinian reflections on animal ethics. Moral concepts undergo changes in meaning and context over time. Philosophers cannot possibly possess a priori knowledge of such evolving concepts. They should rather rely on qualitative data to explore the conceptualisations people live by in the particular contexts in question.

The following two examples illustrate our point. Firstly, the understanding of “pet” can vary. If Wittgensteinians are interested in developing ethical reflections grounded in what the concept “pet” means for a particular group of people, they should gather qualitative data about how the concept is used by that group of people. For example, Alison Sealey and Nickie Charles, following the idea that people’s experience and practices involving animals are reflected in their language (Sealey and Charles 2013, 486–487; see also Atran and Medin 2010), gathered qualitative data through open questions among UK citizens about the way they conceive animals. By asking, for example, “what is it that distinguishes a pet from other animals?,” they received a variety of different answers which show that within large populations, such concepts tend to vary (Sealey and Charles 2013, 493; see also Blouin 2013). Generally, however, the understanding of “pet” is often mixed with that of “family member” (Cain 1985; Cohen 2002; Walsh 2009). There is empirical evidence that pets in Israel are increasingly considered to be part of the family. In fact, they can be explicitly assigned the status of “children” (or implicitly assigned the status of “flexible persons” (Shir-Vertesh 2012, 422)). Data gathered in the US show that pets assume a crucial function in social (Bulsara et al. 2007) and familiar interactions (Cain 1985; Walsh 2009) since they are sometimes described as the “glue” that keeps the family together, or the beings around which one’s “household revolves” (Walsh 2009, 483). This does not mean that there are no other contexts where the same conditions apply. It is, though, an empirical question, one that should be tested in each different situation.

Secondly, the idea of applying a given concept to a novel situation may be inconceivable to some ethicists. They might need empirical evidence to stretch the limits of their imagination. Diamond initially doubted that the concept of “friendship” could be extended to encompass all animals (Diamond 1978, 470). She has, though, later on acknowledged that her perspective was limited. This was after she witnessed bonding between whales and Greenpeace rescuers (Monsó and Grimm 2019, 12). Another example comes from the experience of Hannah Winther. She discusses the value that

empirical inquiry can have when it comes to grasping the conceptualisations that different forms of life have about animals. She recounts how her ways of conceptualising salmon was enriched by learning how people from Norwegian and Samí cultures employ concepts like “iconic,” “beautiful,” and “amazing” to describe salmon (Winther 2022, 11).

The kind of data from social sciences that should be employed by Wittgensteinians should then make explicit the way agents conceptualise animals in a given practice. These data can be gathered through qualitative interviews where questions such as “what is it that distinguishes a pet/a vermin/patient from other animals?” (Sealey and Charles 2014, 493) can be asked to agents involved in a practice. A limitation of the present paper is that it cannot provide concrete and detailed examples of the kind of empirically derived qualitative data from which Wittgensteinian ethical reflection would most benefit. Indeed, we would need a data set about a particular context and about a particular problem to start with. For example, about the ethical issues concerning euthanasia in veterinary clinical practice in Austria. However, while we maintain that every ethical reflection should begin with an analysis of the concepts people engage with in a specific context, we would like to broadly outline how this process would look in general terms.

Let’s consider the moral complexities that veterinarians face when dealing with the euthanasia of, for example, a dog. Here the Wittgensteinian would be required to understand how the dog is conceptualised by the various agents. Beyond merely interacting with a sentient being, veterinarians grapple with diverse conceptualizations of the animal, influenced by how they and their clients perceive the dog. An inquiry into such perception would provide the Wittgensteinian with a clear idea of how the animal is conceived by different actors in the context of the clinic. Social sciences could then provide a systematically developed and transparent starting point (as opposed to the experiences that Diamond and Taylor have with their pets). As previously mentioned, pets might not only be seen as “family members,” but also as companions with whom people share emotional bonds and confide in (Walsh 2009; Allen 1995). Some even refer to them as “‘live-in’ therapists” (Cain 1983; Walsh 2009, 485), highlighting their indispensable role in their owners’ lives. As a result, when veterinarians attend to a pet, they are not only dealing with a “patient” but also with a being intertwined with specific practices that constitute the essence of the client’s life. The loss of a pet can lead to significant grieving for the owner (McCutcheon and Fleming 2001) and this underscores the intricate nature of the veterinarian’s decisions, which cannot be simply reduced to maximizing the welfare of a being with interests. In certain situations, clinicians may even need to “encourage families to create healing rituals to mourn their loss and honor their companion animals” (Walsh 2009, 490; see also Imber-Black, Roberts and Whiting 2003; Hafen al. 2007).

Exploring such conceptualisations allows the Wittgensteinian to gain insight about the differences between cases of euthanasia in small animal practice and cases of euthanasia of farm animals. Farmers might see animals as commodities or sources of income (Springer et al. 2019, 9) rather than as “family members.” Concepts such as “commodity” would highlight a tension between what the animal means for the farmer’s life with what it means for veterinarians who might find themselves as “advocates for the animal patient” (Springer et al. 2019, 7). Horses, for example, might be seen in completely different ways whether they are kept as a pet or as livestock. It is by departing from such conceptualisations that the Wittgensteinian philosopher can develop their ethical reflections. However, what these conceptualisations are, must be explored on a case-by-case basis, following the Wittgensteinian idea that meaning is determined by use.

The above considerations provide important insight into the work of social scientists. The data collected by social scientists in interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, are normatively relevant. They grant us a glimpse into the conceptual world that constitutes the moral landscape of a particular group of agents. Given how their anti-reductionist and descriptive perspectives are rooted in forms of life, Wittgensteinians are well advised to collaborate with social scientists. This can be fruitful when it comes to describing and evaluating moral practices in real-life complexities. It can, then, serve as a solid foundation for grounding Wittgensteinians’ moral criticisms. They should not wait and hope for the poet’s glimpse into the depths of new concepts. Rather, they should systematically and empirically explore how different understandings of concepts shape people’s understanding of moral problems.

6 Discussion

We have argued that Wittgensteinians should substantiate their ethical judgments with empirical data from the social sciences. An interesting question is whether social scientists are ethicists, given that they provide us with normative material. We think that the answer is “no.” Social scientists can describe how people think about moral issues, but they are not typically reflecting on how people think in order to judge whether they are right or wrong in doing a certain action. Social scientists can help us answer questions like “how are animals thought of in this or that practice?” Ethicists, whether orthodox or not, in contrast, ask questions like “is this way of conceptualising about animals appropriate?”; “are there other ways we can think about this problem?” and so on. Ethics – at least the Wittgensteinian understanding of it that we have outlined in Section 3 is the activity or discipline of reflecting on already-held beliefs and already-established concepts. We are doing the work of

ethicists as soon as we (1) reflect on the concepts we live by and (2) use those concepts as justificatory reasons (rather than as mere explanatory reasons).

This leads to a further question. If the line between descriptive and normative issues becomes indistinct – if the line between “is” and “ought” becomes blurred – would this justify the status quo? If so, then Wittgensteinian approaches offer little in comparison to orthodox approaches, as they would be defending an ethical perspective incapable of providing any moral criticism. One might even be led to question the purpose of this article. Why propose improving an animal ethics position that is ultimately not worth considering? This is not the primary focus of our discussion; addressing it in detail would require more than is possible in this paper. It is, nonetheless, necessary to provide a brief response to such concerns.

Advocates of the orthodox approach are sometimes concerned that Wittgensteinians would defend the status quo, because they are simply “reducing ethics into sociology” (Aaltola 2010, 37). By surrendering the high ground that moral principles offer, the ethicist can no longer criticise a given state of affairs. This concern relies on a misunderstanding of the Wittgensteinian position. It is true that Wittgensteinians claim that criticism must rely on forms of life. However, this does not mean that we should accept any “of the multitudinous contents that happen to be subsumed by that form” (Pleasants 2006, 332). As a matter of fact, though Wittgensteinians tend to refuse that there is some absolute point from which we can judge everything, they still concede that there are concepts, or as Diamond calls them “guides to thinking” that survive the test of time (Diamond 2019, 303). So even if they develop, so to speak, a bottom-up approach, this does not mean that various forms of life do not share part of the same ground. Wittgensteinians tend to emphasize anti-reductionism and the need to accept that every “exploration has to be carried out from a position of immanence within linguistic practice” (Lovibond 2019, 97–98). But this in no way entails that there is one linguistic practice which is the right one.

Discussing the ethics of animal experimentation, Diamond remarks that a “laboratory rat is neither a machine nor a person; if it were one or the other, there would be no problem with how to draw the boundaries of morality” (Diamond 1991a, 346). How we should conceptualise the rat is undecided (let alone how we ought to treat it). What is clear is that there is something off – something morally distasteful – about treating an animal as a research tool. The problem arises from within a form of life. There is no need to appeal to a principle of utility maximisation. Wittgensteinians contend that the variety of ways in which we conceptualise animals in our forms of life provides sufficient resources for ethical critique and change (Christensen 2021; Diamond 1997).

This means that the Wittgensteinian approach does not merely provide us with (1) a description of the conceptualisations that constitute an understanding of a particular practice, and (2) the nuances that characterise a context. Rather, it helps us to reflect on these descriptions and nuances. It asks us to try out different concepts and compare them against each other (Diamond 1991a). Is this animal necessarily a pest? Or can we treat it like a liminal noisy neighbour? Is the laboratory rat a tool? Or, does it make, after all, sense to conceive it as a companion?

The only move that Wittgensteinians refuses to make is to reduce the moral landscape to a set of principles, a set of principles that putatively grants us a high ground from where to judge human-animal interactions. For Wittgensteinians, we never have and never will attain such a high ground. We might say that our moral landscape is full of hills and valleys. It is a landscape that we must explore when confronted with a moral problem that requires workable solutions. Within the plurality of moral concepts that constitute forms of life, we must reflect on – we must take account of – every extant element. There is no ultimate conceptualisation that we can “force” on reality and then declare “this is how the world is!” (cf. Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2022).

Wittgensteinianism cannot be hasty dismissed. The Wittgensteinian approach might allow us a methodologically fine-grained understanding of various situations. It can provide us with the tools for a nuanced moral criticism of the ways we deal with animals. Different communities are entrenched in different webs of meaning, different practices, and different uses of languages. To successfully explore the plurality of conceptualisations that constitute such webs, Wittgensteinians are well advised to collaborate with social scientists. With these resources, Wittgensteinians might demonstrate how their account offers a more fine-tuned understanding than the one offered by orthodox accounts.

7 Conclusions

We have argued that incorporating empirical data from the social sciences is essential for Wittgensteinian approaches to animal ethics because such data can determine Wittgensteinians’ ethical reflections by identifying the concepts upon which the criticism can start. Wittgensteinian approaches require empirical data to comprehend the foundations on which their criticism of orthodox approaches is based. Given their anti-reductionist and descriptive stance, Wittgensteinians identify a broad range of elements as justificatory reasons. These elements, they claim, characterise our lived morality in a way that orthodox approaches do not. Wittgensteinians argue that the reasons why we should hold a particular moral judgment are found in the concepts that constitute our understanding of morality within specific forms of life. For example, the wrongness of eating one’s pet exceeds the

violation of a principle that prohibits us from harming a sentient being. Instead, it reflects an action that disrupts our form of life and thereby threatens the meaning of a good life.

Wittgensteinian approaches to animal ethics have mostly refrained from systematically engaging in empirical analyses during ethical reflection. They have, instead, traditionally turned to poetry and literary fiction to exemplify the richness of moral life. Although we acknowledge the importance of literary works in enhancing moral understanding, we contend that the social sciences can offer valuable information. This is because concepts evolve over time and can vary across different forms of life. In short, Wittgensteinian ethics needs empirical data from the social sciences if it is to live up to its own methodological promises of providing us a more fine-grained understanding of ethical problems.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude to the Messerli Research Institute members for their precious inputs and in particular to Konstantin Deininger and Konstantin Eckl for their invaluable feedback and comments to the text. We would, further, like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments have allowed us to greatly improve the clarity of the text.

References

- Aaltola, Elisa. 2010. "The Anthropocentric Paradigm and the Possibility of Animal Ethics." *Ethics and the Environment* 15 (1): 27–50.
- Aaltola, E., and J. Hadley, eds. 2014. *Animal Ethics and Philosophy: Questioning the Orthodoxy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Agam-Segal, Reshef. 2019. "Cora Diamond and the Uselessness of Argument: Distances in Metaphysics and Ethics." In *Morality in a Realistic Spirit*, 50–67. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Agam-Segal, R., and Edmund Dain, eds. 2017. *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Allen, K. 1995. "Coping with Life Changes and Transitions: The Role of Pets." *Interactions* 13: 5–8.
- Atran, S., and D. Medin. 2010. *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Blouin, D. D. 2013. "Are Dogs Children, Companions, or Just Animals? Understanding Variations in People's Orientations toward Animals." *Anthrozoös* 26: 279–294.
- Borry, P., P. Schotsmans, and K. Dierickx. 2005. "The Birth of the Empirical Turn in Bioethics." *Bioethics* 19: 49–67.

- Bulsara, M., L. Wood, B. Giles-Corti, and D. Bosch. 2007. "More Than a Furry Companion: The Ripple Effect of Companion Animals on Neighborhood Interactions and Sense of Community." *Society & Animals* 15: 43–56.
- Cain, Ann 1983. "A Study of Pets in the Family System." In *New Perspectives on Our Lives with Companion Animals*, edited by A. Katcher and A. Beck, 72–81. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cain, A. 1985. "Pets as Family Members." In *Pets and the Family*, edited by M. Sussman, 5–10. New York: Haworth Press.
- Caplan, A. L. 1980. "Ethical Engineers Need Not Apply: The State of Applied Ethics Today." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 5: 24–32.
- Christensen, Anne. Marie Søndergaard. 2017. "What Is Ethical Cannot Be Taught—Moral Theories as Descriptions of Moral Grammar." In *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought*, edited by R. Agam-Segal and E. Dain, 175–199. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 2021. *Moral Philosophy and Moral Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, S. P. 2002. "Can Pets Function as Family Members?" *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 24: 621–638.
- Crary, Alice. 2007. *Beyond Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . "Minding What Already Matters: A Critique of Moral Individualism." *Philosophical Topics* 38: 17–49.
- . 2016. *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crary, Alice, and Lori Gruen. 2022. *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Davies, R., J. Ives, and M. Dunn. 2015. "A Systematic Review of Empirical Bioethics Methodologies." *BMC Medical Ethics* 16: 15.
- Deininger, Konstantin, Andreas Aigner, and Herwig Grimm. 2022. "Resisting Moral Conservatism with Difficulties of Reality: A Wittgensteinian-Diamondian Approach to Animal Ethics." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 57: 1–19.
- De Mesel, Benjamin, and Oskari Kuusela, eds. 2019. *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Delon, Nicolas 2015. "Against Moral Intrinsicism." In *Animal Ethics and Philosophy: Questioning the Orthodoxy*, edited by E. Aaltola and J. Hadley, 31–45. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Diamond, Cora 1978. "Eating Meat and Eating People." *Philosophy* 53: 465–479.

- .1991a. “Experimenting on Animals: A Problem in Ethics.” In *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*, edited by C. Diamond, 335–365. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- .1991b. “The Importance of Being Human.” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 29: 35–62.
- .1997. “Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions.” In *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, edited by L. Alanen, S. Heinämaa, and T. Wallgren. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- . 2003. “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy.” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1: 1–26.
- .2019. *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dransart, P. 2002. *Earth, Water, Fleece, and Fabric: An Ethnography and Archaeology of Andean Camelid Herding*. London and New York: Psychology Press.
- Fischer, Bobby, Clare Palmer, and Thomas J. Kasperbauer. 2023. “Hybrid Theories, Psychological Plausibility, and the Human/Animal Divide.” *Philosophical Studies* 180: 1105–1123.
- Flanagan, Owen 1991. *The Science of the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Flynn, J. 2022. “Theory and Bioethics.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2022 ed., edited by E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman. Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Francione, Gary L., and R. Garner. 2010. *The Animal Rights Debate: Abolition or Regulation?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gaita, Raimond 2000. *A Common Humanity*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Glock, Hans-Johann. 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell.
- Hafen, M., B. Rush, A. Reisbig, K. McDaniel, and M. White. 2007. “The Role of Family Therapists in Veterinary Medicine: Opportunities for Clinical Services, Education, and Research.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 33: 165–176.
- Hämäläinen, Nora. 2021. “Wittgenstein, Ethics and Fieldwork in Philosophy.” In *Ethics after Wittgenstein*, edited by R. Amesbury and H. von Sass, 28–48. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hunn, E. 1982. “The Utilitarian Factor in Folk Biological Classification.” *American Anthropologist* 84: 830–847.
- Hurst, S. 2010. “What ‘Empirical Turn in Bioethics’?” *Bioethics* 24: 439–444.

- Imber-Black, E., J. Roberts, and R. Whiting, eds. 2003. *Rituals in Families and Family Therapy*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton.
- John, T. M., and J. Sebo. 2020. "Consequentialism and Nonhuman Animals." In *The Oxford Handbook of Consequentialism*, edited by D. W. Portmore, 564–591. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kasperbauer, Thomas. J. 2017. *Subhuman: The Moral Psychology of Human Attitudes to Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kockelman, P. 2011. "A Mayan Ontology of Poultry: Selfhood, Affect, Animals, and Ethnography." *Language in Society* 40: 427–454.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 2018. *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kuusela, Oskari 2022. "Defending Diamond Against Harcourt: Wittgensteinian Moral Philosophy and the Subject Matter of Ethics." In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Friendship*, edited by D. Jeske, 138–150. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lee, D. 1992. *Competing Discourses: Perspective and Ideology in Language*. London: Longman.
- Leget, C., P. Borry, and R. De Vries. 2009. "'Nobody Tosses a Dwarf!' The Relation Between the Empirical and the Normative Reexamined." *Bioethics* 23: 226–235.
- Lovibond, Sabine 2019. "Between Tradition and Criticism: The 'Uncodifiability' of the Normative." In *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*, edited by B. De Mesel and O. Kuusela, 84–102. Abingdon: Routledge.
- McCutcheon, K. A., and S. J. Fleming. 2001. "Grief Resulting from Euthanasia and Natural Death of Companion Animals." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 44: 169–188.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?" *The Monist* 67: 498–513.
- McMahan, Jeff. 2005. "Our Fellow Creatures." *Journal of Ethics* 9: 353–380.
- Monsó, Susanna, and Herwig Grimm. 2019. "An Alternative to the Orthodoxy in Animal Ethics? Limits and Merits of the Wittgensteinian Critique of Moral Individualism." *Animals* 9: 1057.
- Mulhall, Stephen. 2021. "Moralism, Moral Individualism and Testimony." In *Cora Diamond on Ethics*, edited by S. Mulhall, 175–195. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. C. 2012. *Giustizia Poetica: Immaginazione Letteraria e Vita Civile*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Palmer, Clare. 2010. *Animal Ethics in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Persson, Kirsten, and David Shaw. 2015. "Empirical Methods in Animal Ethics." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 28: 853–866.

- Pleasants, Nigel. 2006. "Nonsense on Stilts? Wittgenstein, Ethics, and the Lives of Animals." *Inquiry* 49: 314–336.
- Regan, Tom. 2004. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Salskov, Salla A., Ondrej Beran, and Nora Hämäläinen, eds. 2022. *Ethical Inquiries After Wittgenstein*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer.
- Sealey, A., and N. Charles. 2013. "'What Do Animals Mean to You?': Naming and Relating to Nonhuman Animals." *Anthrozoös* 26: 485–503.
- Shakespeare, William. 2001. *King Lear*. Uxbridge: Classic Books Company.
- Shir-Vertesh, D. 2012. "Flexible Personhood: Loving Animals as Family Members in Israel." *American Anthropologist* 114: 420–432.
- Singer, Peter. 1975. *Animal Liberation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Springer, Svenja, F. Jenner, A. Tichy, and Herwig Grimm. 2019. "Austrian Veterinarians' Attitudes to Euthanasia in Equine Practice." *Animals* 9: 44.
- Springer, Svenja, Peter Sandøe, Thomas Bøker Lund, and Herwig Grimm. 2019. "'Patients' Interests First, but...': Austrian Veterinarians' Attitudes to Moral Challenges in Modern Small Animal Practice." *Animals* 9: 241.
- Steiner, Gary. 2008. *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status, and Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Taylor, Charles 2019. "Our Fellow Creatures." In *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*, edited by O. Kuusela and B. De Mesel, 220–232. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Višak, Tatiana 2022. *Capacity for Welfare Across Species*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walsh, Freddie 2009. "Human-Animal Bonds II: The Role of Pets in Family Systems and Family Therapy." *Family Process* 48: 481–499.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. "Persons, Character, and Morality." In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*, 1–19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winther, Hannah. 2022. "Reflective Empiricism and Empirical Animal Ethics." *Animals* 12: 2143.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2010. *Philosophical Investigations*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Article 3: Scepticism about Moral Certainty

Sub-research question 1: What are the potentials and the limits of a practice-based approach to animal ethics?

Status: Submitted to *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

Authorship contribution statement: The original draft was conceptualized and written by the first author. Review and editing were employed by the first and last author. Supervision by the last author. Both authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript. Please refer to the supplementary material for the signed transparency agreement.

Abstract: In this paper, we analyse contemporary accounts of moral certainty and assess whether they address the moral sceptic's challenge. We take the moral sceptic to be someone who claims that no one ever knows any substantial moral belief to be true. We argue that moral certainty must counter the regress argument upon which the sceptic's strategy relies. To do this, moral certainties must satisfy two conditions: a) the foundational and b) the substantial condition. We distinguish three ways in which the notion of moral certainty has been conceptualised in the contemporary debate. We argue that none of these conceptualisations meets both conditions, and hence all three fail to rebut the moral sceptic's challenge.

Keywords: Wittgensteinian ethics, moral certainty, moral scepticism, moral knowledge

1 Introduction

This paper examines the notion of *moral certainty* as developed in contemporary Wittgensteinian studies. Its main aim is to assess whether this notion can address a central problem in moral philosophy – namely, whether it offers a way to respond to the challenge posed by the moral sceptic about the impossibility of establishing a firm ground for moral knowledge.

In recent times, some Wittgensteinian scholars have argued that the basis of our moral practices is not rational justification derived from pure reason, but what Nigel Pleasants first called “basic moral certainties” (2008; 2009; 2015). This notion is inspired by Wittgenstein’s epistemological remarks in *On Certainty*. As Jordi Fairhurst puts it, certainties “can be broadly understood as the fundamental presuppositions of our worldview, which are exempt from doubt and make it possible for us to perform other epistemic operations, such as discovering, justifying, verifying, evaluating beliefs as rational, and giving reasons for belief and doubt” (2024, 120).

Wittgenstein’s investigations have sparked extensive debate of which one strand focuses on the content of certainties – what these certainties are actually about (e.g., Kusch 2021). Another addresses their scope, questioning whether certainties are “universal” (Hermann 2015; Pleasants 2015; Laves 2020) or instead “local” (Brice 2013; Rummens 2013; Fairhurst 2019). A further discussion examines their nature: are certainties propositional (Coliva and Palmira 2020) or non-propositional (Stroll 1994; Moyal-Sharrock 2004; Pleasants 2015; Hermann 2015)? On the former view, as O’Hara et al. describe, certainties are “sentential, contentful and linguistic” (2023, 11), whereas on the latter they are “manifest in action” (O’Hara et al. 2023). Another fruitful line of inquiry concerns the possible role of certainties in responding to sceptical challenges. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein famously addressed the dispute between Moore and the epistemic sceptic about the external world by attempting to dissolve the problem altogether. While the sceptic argued that no proposition about the external world is beyond doubt, Moore maintained that some propositions – such as “This is my right hand” – are simply things we know. Wittgenstein, however, responded that Moore was not demonstrating knowledge but rather expressing certainty. That of which we are certain, unlike what we know, is exempt from doubt and does not invite further demands for justification. For instance, statements like “[M]y hands don’t disappear when I am not paying attention” (Wittgenstein 1975, § 153), “Every human being has parents” (Wittgenstein 1975, §211), or “The world existed before my birth” (Wittgenstein 1975, § 288) are, according to Wittgenstein, expressions of certainty rather than knowledge (Wittgenstein 1975, § 308).

The key difference is that certainties are immune to doubt and do not require justification, whereas knowledge claims are always liable to challenge: “One says ‘I know’ something when one is ready to give compelling grounds” (Wittgenstein 1975, § 159). We cannot say we know that our hands do not disappear when we are not paying attention, since claiming to know something invites further justification. By contrast, certainties stand outside this demand.

Thus, by conflating certainty with knowledge, Moore inadvertently made these propositions vulnerable to doubt and encouraged the sceptic to press for further justification. Wittgenstein, by contrast, argues that these certainties form the very bedrock of our epistemic practices. They are presuppositions we take for granted whenever we claim to know or to doubt anything at all. In this sense, certainties make both knowledge and doubt possible in the first place (Johnson 2017), but are themselves not susceptible to doubt.

Wittgenstein not only critiques Moore but also turns the tables on the sceptic. Because certainties serve as the very foundation of our epistemic practices, attempting to doubt them would undermine the entire framework in which doubt and assertion operate. The problem is thus dissolved in classic Wittgensteinian fashion – by revealing that the sceptic is, so to speak, sawing off the branch on which they are sitting. As Wittgenstein puts it: “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (Wittgenstein 1975 § 115; see also §§ 114, 341).

In this regard, a growing literature has explored the possibility to translate Wittgenstein’s insight from his epistemic investigations to the moral realm by formulating the notion of *moral certainty* recently (e.g., Pleasants 2008; 2009; 2015; Hermann 2015; Laves 2022). Although much has already been written about moral certainties – and several authors have already suggested that they might offer a response to the moral sceptic (Rummens 2013; Fairhurst 2019; O’Hara et al. 2023) – only a few have explicitly framed moral certainties as a direct answer to the moral sceptic’s challenge (e.g., Hermann 2015; Laves 2023).¹

In this paper, we will examine whether the concept of moral certainty can address and perhaps even “dissolve” the challenge posed by moral scepticism. We begin by formulating the moral sceptic’s

¹ Even if Julia Hermann uses the notion of moral certainty to address regress arguments she does not explicitly discuss scepticism (Hermann 2015, 8-15). Since Hermann thinks that moral certainties can provide an answer to the regress argument and since the moral sceptic employs regress argument, in the following pages we will provide a response to Hermann’s account.

On his behalf, Samuel Laves explicitly claims that he is addressing the sceptic. Indeed, he characterises sceptics as those who “deny the existence of moral knowledge or moral truth” (Laves 2023, 157). However, his counter-argument to the sceptic is merely that reasonable doubt is impossible when discussing moral certainties and does not address the regress argument.

argument. We then proceed to argue that, in order to address her argument, moral certainties must satisfy two conditions. Finally we examine three specific ways in which moral certainties have been conceptualised by Wittgensteinian scholars, and argue that none of these approaches meets the two conditions, and consequently fail to adequately address the sceptic's argument.

2 The moral sceptic

There are different varieties of moral scepticism. Some authors doubt that it is possible to identify moral theories that have the authority to bind us (e.g., Williams 2011, 102; Christensen 2021, 19-24), some doubt their motivational force (e.g., Williams 1985, 29; Smith 1994), others doubt that moral discourse refers to mind-independent moral entities (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001). Since we are concerned with moral certainty, our discussion will centre on epistemic moral scepticism² rather than ontological or metaphysical varieties. This is because moral certainties primarily involve questions of knowledge – what can be known or justified – rather than questions about the nature of reality. The epistemic moral sceptic (henceforth, just “moral sceptic”) challenges the assumption that we can provide a solid foundation for moral knowledge since the truth of every alleged moral belief can be doubted.³ Such a challenge can be reformulated through positive a claim:

Moral challenge (MC): Nobody ever knows that any substantive moral belief is true.

The moral challenge is then substantiated via a regress argument (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, 74–77; Empiricus 1996, chap. XV), relying on the classical presupposition that knowledge is justified true belief, and the further assumption that a moral belief can only be justified by inferring it from an already justified true moral belief. This leads either to circularity or to an infinite regress: one either relies on the very moral belief one is trying to justify, or must continue indefinitely, justifying each belief by reference to further justified beliefs.

One of the responses to MC has been to try blocking the regress by claiming that some moral propositions are just self-evident and do not require further justification. For example, Renford Bambrough (1979), echoing G.E. Moore's famous reply to the epistemic sceptic, claimed that some

² This means that even if we were to provide an answer to the epistemic sceptic we would still need to fend off other forms of scepticism. Bernard Williams' sceptic, for example, is not someone who challenges the existence of alleged moral truths but rather someone that challenges the idea that moral truths have any normative force on us whatsoever (1985). This means that even if we'd find a decisive argument in favour of the existence of moral truths we would still face the issue of explaining in what way those truths ought to be normative (more on this later).

³ There are other forms of epistemic moral scepticisms. For example, Sharon Street argues that even if objective, stance-independent moral facts existed, our evolutionary origins provide no reason to think that our moral judgements reliably track them (Street 2006).

moral facts are self-evident, providing a foundation for moral knowledge.⁴ For example, Bambrough suggests that propositions such as “I just know that not giving analgesic to this innocent child is wrong” are self-evident (Bambrough 1979, 12–15). The difficulty with this strategy lies in its apparent arbitrariness: halting the justificatory process at a particular proposition seems unjustified, since, in principle, further reasons could always be provided – for instance, one might appeal to a hedonic utilitarian argument that withholding analgesics increases overall suffering. This prompts the question of why Bambrough’s intuition should be privileged over alternative justificatory frameworks. Thus, while appealing to self-evidence halts the regress, it still must explain why this stopping point is not arbitrary.

A Wittgensteinian answer, following contemporary work on moral certainty would be to clarify that it is wrong to talk about moral knowledge in these cases (Hermann 2015; Laves 2023). We should rather talk about moral certainty. When discussing Bambrough, for example, Julia Hermann suggests that “Not giving analgesic to this innocent child is wrong” and “Killing is wrong” are examples of moral certainties that can constitute, and function as, the indubitable bedrock on which further arguments and knowledge can be built (Hermann 2015).

Thus, the challenge posed by the moral sceptic could allegedly be dissolved, following Wittgenstein's argument in *On Certainty* by claiming that it does not make sense to ask for further reasons; if it is correct that the mentioned examples are moral certainties, it does not make sense to put forward doubts when confronted with them. The argument runs: if, on the one hand, knowledge can be defined as justified true belief, and is therefore expressed by propositions that can be doubted, then certainties, while they might still be expressed as propositions, function differently and are not subjected to the same justificatory requirements (Johnson 2019, 201). Language games of doubting and justifying come to an end when moral certainties are at stake, because these certainties constitute the framework within which meaningful doubt can occur.

To assess whether it is possible to provide such an answer to the moral sceptic we will need to clarify what it is about moral certainties that can block the moral sceptic’s regress.

3 On what certainties are: the recent debate in moral philosophy

Contemporary accounts have identified specific requirements that need to be satisfied for moral certainties to classify as such. The most prominent account of moral certainties has been developed

⁴ As Laves notes a similar attempt has been recently done by Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau who claim that some moral propositions are just conceptual truths (2023; Cuneo-Shafer-Landau 2014)

by Pleasants (2009, 2008, 2015) and later picked up by others (e.g., Hermann 2015; Laves 2022; 2023). Pleasants claims that our moral discourse relies on an indubitable foundation – e.g. on the idea that everybody seems to know that, for example, killing is wrong. According to Pleasants and Hermann, when one asserts a proposition like “killing is wrong” one has reached an unquestionable bedrock that cannot be doubted except at the cost of being characterised as someone who is suffering from severe mental illness and/or uttering nonsense. When uttered in non-philosophical contexts, moral certainties are bizarre. As Pleasants notices, “[t]his bizarreness comes not from the content of what is asserted – which is unremarkably true after all – but from encountering basic certainty transmogrified into propositional form” (Pleasants 2008, 250). What is stated is beyond doubt and obvious, and the fact that it is stated warrants the interlocutor in questioning the speaker’s competency as a language user.

Pleasants’ account of moral certainties, which he calls *basic moral certainties*, inspired other authors (Rummens 2013; Brice 2013; Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2022, Laves 2023) to provide different understandings of what grounds our moral language games. Despite some differences, it is safe to say that these accounts share some specific characteristics to identify moral certainties that have been conveniently identified by Hermann (2015; see also Fairhurst 2024). Among these, only three are of relevance for answering the moral sceptic: the idea that with moral certainty 1) “Reasonable doubt is impossible” (2015, 87), that 2) “Everybody seems to know the issue in question” (Herman 2015, 87) and finally that 3) “There are no supporting reasons that are more certain” (Hermann 2015, 87). A further element that we would add, is that 4) moral certainties can take the form of moral knowledge.

This fourth element is crucial when considering whether moral certainties can counter the moral sceptic’s challenge, as it highlights the underlying mistake of Moore, Bambrough, and the sceptic: they all confuse certainties with knowledge. This confusion arises because some beliefs merely resemble knowledge-apt propositions, when in fact they are certainties. As Wittgenstein points out in response to this category error: “not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition⁵ is one” (Wittgenstein 1975, § 308). It is precisely because the sceptic can frame certainties as if they were ordinary knowledge claims that the sceptical challenge gains traction in the first place.

These points allow us to identify two essential conditions that provide the potential for moral certainties to properly address, and dissolve, the challenge posed by the moral sceptic. The first, which we will call the *foundational condition*, aims to show that moral certainties must counter the regress

⁵ Wittgenstein uses the term “empirical propositions” to refer to knowledge-apt propositions that refer to the empirical world such as those that claim that tables exist even if we turn our backs away from them (Wittgenstein 1975, §§ 119, 163) or that every human being has a brain in their skull (Wittgenstein 1975, §§ 4, 118, 207).

argument. In other words, moral certainties must function as “regress stoppers” (Deininger and Grimm 2024). This condition is exemplified by 3), which states that it does not make sense to provide further reasons once one has reached a certainty: “Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned” (Wittgenstein 2009, § 217). The second condition, the *substantial condition*, is exemplified by 2). It has two important elements: on the one hand, the idea that certainty must be shared – that is, everybody must act on it as if it were obvious, and this must imply that reasonable doubt is impossible (see point 1) as well in this regard); on the other, the implicit idea that the beliefs that constitute a certainty are *about something* – specifically, about the particular “issue in question.”

The first element of the substantial condition can be interpreted differently depending on whom “everybody” refers to. It could refer to every human being, to every rational being, to every member of a specific community etc. (cf. O’Hara 2018., 93-154; Ariso 2020).⁶ For the sake of argument, we will avoid such complexities and by drawing from point 3) assume that “everybody” refers to any competent, serious person who is able to engage in moral language games.

The second element of the substantial condition, that it needs to have a content, is relevant to address the moral sceptic’s challenge because the advocate of moral certainties must be able to point at a specific action to show *about what* one is certain. The belief that a particular, or some class of actions are wrong must be about something, a particular action, e.g., killing. If moral certainties would not have content, there would be no instance that can be taken as an example of the existence of moral certainties. In fact, if certainties did not have a content the discussion with the sceptic could never take place. The very fact that one can use the concept of certainty to address the challenge posed by the sceptic means that there is a particular instance this certainty is about, and that the sceptic is mistaking for knowledge (e.g., when she doubts the wrongness of the killing of one particular person).

In other words, the moral sceptic demands a foundation that allows us to identify and correctly evaluate particular moral facts – something that would command the agreement of every serious person. If “X is wrong” were a moral certainty, then, when X occurs, its wrongness would never be put in doubt, and our moral knowledge could be built upon that foundation. Doubting the wrongness of X would be nonsensical and would undermine the common ground from which anyone could begin

⁶ This constitutes a problem that different accounts of moral certainties ought to address. For example, assuming that the certainty is held by every human being forces them to deal with counterexamples where at least one human being thinks otherwise. Instead, by limiting the extension to every rational being or to every member of a specific community the Wittgensteinian faces other problems: when dealing with the sceptics’ challenge the former answer begs the question by shifting the ultimate ground of justification to the rationality of the agent who holds the belief whereas in the latter case the sceptic might still ask why one *ought* to be part of that specific moral community.

to construct moral reasons. For example, if we take “killing is wrong” as a moral certainty, then we would have a clear kind of action whose wrongness is universally accepted: its wrongness would be indubitable, shown by the fact that no sane person would question or even raise the issue.⁷

We should note that the substantial condition encompasses the foundational condition, since it also functions as a regress stopper. Given a particular situation whose wrongness everyone would agree upon, it is possible to answer the sceptic: “this is just how we act” or “this is the shared foundation that no sane person would doubt!” The foundational condition is needed to stop the demand for justifications, and the substantial condition is required to show the sceptic that there are indeed situations where no competent and serious agent doubts a particular moral statement.

To sum up, we can summarise the foundational and the substantial condition as follows:

- a) Foundational Condition: Moral certainties need to function as regress stoppers to counter the regress argument.
- b) Substantial Condition: Moral certainties need to be held by everyone and have content.

In brief: a moral certainty would then function as the undoubtable basis that we all agree upon and thus as the foundation of our morality. We shall now set out three interpretations of moral certainty and ask whether any of them can indeed function in this way.

4 Types of certainties

In the recent debate, it is possible to identify three accounts of how we can look at moral certainties: a) propositional certainties (Brice 2013; Rummens 2013), b) non-propositional certainties (Pleasants 2008; 2009; 2015; Hermann 2015; Laves 2023) and c) transcendental certainties (Johnson 2019; Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2022; Deininger and Grimm 2024). This classification concerns the *nature* of moral certainty and makes no delineation regarding their content.⁸

Scrutinising each of the accounts of moral certainty one by one, we aim to show that none succeeds in dissolving MC. As it will be shown, the propositional and non-propositional accounts attempt to satisfy both the foundational and substantial conditions, but they do not succeed in this endeavour; and although it complies with the foundational condition, the transcendental account does not satisfy

⁷ We use “killing is wrong” as the main example because in the current debate it is assumed that killing is the moral certainty *par excellence*. As Pleasants has put it: “if killing isn’t wrong then nothing is” (Pleasants 2015).

⁸ For classification of content, see, for example, Martin Kusch (2021, 1098–1103), who categorises certainties in accordance with what the beliefs are about (e.g., one’s own body, semantics, etc.). The classification represented by a), b) and c) is rather based on characteristics of the certainties relating to the sceptic’s challenge within the context of moral epistemology.

the substantial condition. Therefore, moral certainty, as it has been formulated in the contemporary debate, cannot rebut the sceptic's challenge.

The propositional (4.1) and non-propositional (4.2) accounts share the goal of identifying content. Those writing about these certainties employ "killing is wrong" as an example of a moral certainty (Pleasants 2008; 2015; Fairhurst; Ariso 2020; Laves 2020; 2023; Fairhurst 2019; 2024). The difference between the propositional and non-propositional accounts lies in the fact that the former identifies a particular belief that can be expressed in linguistic terms as being certain, whereas the latter holds that the certainty lies in a non-propositional component that grounds our reactions to instances of killing. What exactly lies at the foundation of our moral discourse in the non-propositional account is not entirely clear: in some passages, the advocates of such an approach – Pleasants and Hermann – claim that we tend to have an immediate "abhorrence" of killing (Pleasants 2008, 260), but elsewhere they talk about "an attitude towards innumerable taken for granted states of affairs" (Pleasants 2009, 678; Hermann 2015, 105) or about the fact that certainty is something that is shown in our "acting" (Hermann 2015; Laves 2023). Although Pleasants' account is actually non-propositional, it has been misinterpreted as propositional – e.g. by Brice (2013) and Rummens (2013) – and criticised for not satisfying what we have called the substantial condition. Hermann (2015) has argued that when it is understood properly, in non-propositional terms, Pleasants' account avoids such criticism. We will argue that this is not the case.

Looking at the transcendental account of certainties (4.3), the debate shifts: While certainties with content aim to identify *moral* certainties with particular content, the transcendental account merely conceptualises them as regress stoppers and as formal rules, with no particular content, that guide our moral discourses. An example of transcendental certainty is the equal consideration principle "Equals are to be treated equally." Although we cannot but think that this *is* the case, these certainties do not have a particular content, because, as the authors claim, what *de facto* is "equal" is not given by the certainty – they enable equality considerations. Hence, although the transcendental account satisfies the foundational condition, it does not satisfy the substantial condition.

4.1 Propositional certainty

The *propositional* account of moral certainties we have in mind can be found in Brice (2013) and Rummens (2013).⁹ In the propositional account, moral certainty is understood as constituted by beliefs with particular content, e.g., the belief that any act of killing is to be considered morally wrong.

⁹ Both authors misunderstand Pleasants' account as a propositional one and criticise him accordingly. Pleasants claims to be presenting a non-propositional account and rejects their criticisms (see also Laves 2023)

This interpretation asks us to understand “killing is wrong” as the claim that there is a shared belief, “killing is wrong,” that can never be doubted in any instance of killing. Moreover, it requires us to treat this belief as one that grounds our moral discourse and cannot be meaningfully doubted. “Killing is wrong” has been used throughout the debate as the moral certainty *par excellence*, since there does not seem to be anything worse than killing: as Pleasants has remarked, “if killing isn't wrong, then nothing is” (Pleasants 2015). However, the propositional account fails to address the moral sceptic, since “killing is wrong” does not satisfy the substantial condition: there are cases where killing is not judged to be wrong.

As Pleasants himself (2015) and others (Rummens 2013; Brice 2013; Ariso 2020; Fairhurst 2019; Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2022) have pointed out, there are instances of killing that are not at all morally wrong, and which may in fact even be called for. For example, in the opinion of many of us, actively euthanising someone might sometimes be the right thing to do. Euthanasia is often conceptualised as a form of assistance, since it is conducted in those tragic situations where life becomes an unbearable burden. This instance of killing usually presupposes that the physician has good intentions and that – in the right circumstances, at least – it will lead to the best possible consequences for the patient. It is assumed that active pursuit of the best possible consequences for the patient is *prima facie* a good thing. Hence, euthanasia is thought of as something that is in certain circumstances a morally acceptable form of killing – perhaps even something we have a duty to do.

There are also cases in which an individual is sacrificed for the greater good. Although these cases are much more controversial, it is nonetheless at least conceivable that there may be circumstances in which sacrificing someone is the right thing to do – e.g. in war. The mere fact that there can be a debate about this, and that it is not absurd to think about this possibility, means that in this kind of case it is a moral *controversy*, not a moral certainty, that killing is wrong.

Cases of murder, by contrast, we never doubt, because murder means “wrongful killing” (Hermann 2015, 106). When we use the word “murder,” we are already marking the action with a negative connotation. We are expressing a moral judgment – as opposed to the case of “killing,” where we are not. If someone were to say that sometimes murder is acceptable, we could object that they are misusing the word “murder,” and that the word they were looking for was “killing” or “sacrificing,” or some such term. Since some cases of killing are morally problematic, “killing is wrong” cannot be treated as a moral certainty as a result of its propositional content. Hence “killing is wrong” fails to meet the moral sceptic’s challenge because it does not meet the substantial condition.

It seems that those who argue that “killing is wrong” is a moral certainty are trapped in a particular image of killing that is, in reality, an image of assassination and murder. And such images, besides being tied to other concepts like “person” and “innocent,” are already laden with negative judgment. Cases of murder already contain, by definition, the wrongfulness of the action; however, as noted by Hermann (Hermann 2015, 257), knowing the definition of the term “murder” does not provide us with the ability to discern which instances of killing are instances of murder.

Although sometimes we use “killing” to mean “murdering,” it is important to keep them separate for this analysis. The first is tied to a particular content. The second has a formal component whose applicability depends on whether a specific instance of killing can be classified as murder. For example, as the debate on active euthanasia in medical ethics shows, some people may talk about the same act of killing in two different ways. One might say that killing a sick person is murder, while another insists that it is mercy killing. They share the view that murder is wrong and that mercy killing might be justified; their disagreement lies in how they conceptualise the situation (Agam-Segal 2014). One might say that murder is killing without sufficient or valid reasons, but what qualifies as a sufficient reason is precisely what is contested in the scenario described.

Another two aspects that differentiate killing from murder are the following. First, the killer may not be a moral agent – e.g. a disease kills. Second, the victim of the killing may not be of moral concern. Killing is the action of terminating an individual’s life. We kill plants, animals, bacteria, and humans. We would not say of someone who took an antibiotic that they had just committed the murder of billions. We can, however, say that the antibiotic kills the bacteria. There is nothing wrong in killing bacteria *per se*. At least, it is thinkable that there is nothing wrong with it.

Therefore, the main difference relies on the scope of application these two terms have. It is quite reasonable to point out that while everyone would accept that a specific act is an act of killing, we would not all agree that *this* specific act of killing is wrong.

If one wants to argue for a propositional account the distinction between cases of murder and cases of killing and between the claim that “killing is wrong” and, say, the claim that “killing innocent and non-threatening people” is wrong need to be clearly traced. There is already a profound difference between these two propositions. As noted by Brice, our understanding of “[k]illing an innocent, non-threatening person is wrong” is limited by the language game we are embedded in: “The origin of this conviction cannot be instinctive because our comprehension of concepts like *innocent* and *person* only make sense (only take on meaning) within a *form of life*” (Brice 2013, 480, see also Fairhurst

2019; 2024). On the other hand, the way we speak about “killing is wrong” implies that there is a specific fact that everybody would identify and judge to be wrong.

Therefore, confusing these propositions does not allow us to appreciate that we cannot talk about certainty in one case because not every instance of killing is judged to be wrong. Finally, it is not clear what should count, for example, as “innocent”: the rules governing our use of the term “innocent” are not obvious and are relative to different language games.

Finally, some might argue that since acts of killing are generally considered to be wrong and have almost always been condemned throughout history, we should be more charitable and understand “killing is wrong” as “killing is *prima facie* wrong,” as “at least some killings are wrong” (O’Hara 2018, 101) or as “killing is wrong without good reasons” (Laves 2022). The issue with this interpretation is that it satisfies neither condition: on the one hand, it does not satisfy the foundational condition, as the sceptic seems warranted to keep asking how they know that we *ought* to apply the judgment that killing is wrong in a given instance of killing – or what should count as a good reason – thereby relying on a further moral judgment and opening up the regress again. And on the other, it does not satisfy the substantial condition, as it does not allow us to determine which instances of killing are wrong.

A number of conclusions can be drawn at this point. First, the interpretation of “killing is wrong” as a moral certainty expressing a belief fails to meet the substantial condition, since – as we argued, and has already been argued by others (Brice 2013; Rummens 2013; Fairhurst 2019) – there are many instances of killing that are not considered morally wrong. The proposition “everyone believes that ‘killing is wrong’” is itself wrong. Second, it is also untrue to say that we would question the sanity of those who try to justify, or doubt the wrongness, of particular instances of killing. Third, when confronted with moral certainties, people usually react with confusion. They can legitimately ask: “Why are you pointing out something that obvious?” However, if we say: “killing is wrong,” it is plausible that our interlocutor would object and ask us to specify the circumstances in which the killing takes place. It seems, rather, that the act of killings itself demands reasons and specification: Who has been killed? Why? And for what reason?

4.2 Non-propositional moral certainty

We now turn to the *non-propositional* interpretation of basic moral certainty developed by Pleasants (2008, 2009, 2015) and others (Hermann 2015; Laves 2023). The main aspect of this interpretation for our purposes is that people always have an immediate reaction to the idea of killing someone. These certainties are non-propositional because they do not express a particular belief that can be put

in clear propositional form. They do, however, have content in the sense that there is a *relatum* – in the kind of case we have been considering, killing – that these certainties are about.

Pleasants points out that we *first* have the certainty that killing is wrong and *then* refine our judgment by understanding that it would be permissible in an exceptional situation. Hence, he claims, what is challenged is the truth-apt proposition that relies on certainty, not the certainty itself. Drawing on the work of Cushman et al. (2012), Pleasants argues that “[t]he judgment that a killing is justified inheres in a cognitive process that is quite distinct from the immediate experience of the act’s abhorrence” (Pleasants 2015, 212). He then adds, “I take this to be evidence of the basicness of our certainty that killing as such is wrong” (2015, 212)

The main problem with this account concerns the fact that a visceral reaction cannot be characterised as a certainty because neither is it a belief nor does it have the form of one, while certainties do have the form of beliefs (Wittgenstein 1975, § 308; Pleasants 2008, 250; O’Hara 2018, 104-105). If they did not, they would not provide an adequate response to the moral sceptic: as they would not explain in what way the moral sceptic mistook a certainty for knowledge.

In short: (P1) only propositions which have the form of a belief can be characterised as a certainty; and since (P2) visceral reactions do not have such a form, (C1) they cannot be certainties. As regards (P1), the key point is this: When discussing other aspects of the relevance of moral certainties they have been described as “hinges” (Wittgenstein 1975, §§ 341, 343, 655) or the “bedrock” of our moral discourse. However, such a characterisation is not sufficient to make certainties a plausible answer to the moral sceptic since they need to have *also* the form of a proposition, in order to deceive the sceptic into thinking that they could be doubted. If certainties are supposed to address MC, it is essential to keep in mind that such a challenge is about the possibility of having moral knowledge and not just about whether there is some kind of ground on which our moral practice relies. Answering the moral sceptic by saying that they are mistaking moral certainty with knowledge presupposes that the two can be confused and that therefore they have the same form.

For what concerns (P2), Pleasants may be correct in pointing to a foundational element that is expressed by the proposition “killing is wrong.” Perhaps it is true that the idea of killing triggers a visceral reaction in us. However, this reaction does not *exhaust* the content of “killing is wrong.” Such a proposition contains much more than a mere sensation or feeling; it expresses a normative judgment. More importantly, this sentence can be translated into a belief: “I believe that killing is wrong.” Hence, what we see as a problem in Pleasants’ account is that he seems to deflate a normative judgment, demoting it to the status of a visceral reaction. This seems to be at odds with the idea of

certainty, which assumes that the propositions that express certainty have the form of a belief.¹⁰ Another way of understanding Pleasants' account is by interpreting "killing is wrong" as a *prima facie* moral belief – one that we all hold and that we then challenge if our particular upbringing leads us to do so – rather than a mere visceral reaction. The belief would, in other words, be a belief that everybody *naturally* has, and that our upbringing and exceptional cases might then challenge.

In what follows, we will argue that if "killing is wrong" is understood as a visceral reaction, it cannot be understood as certainty nor can it provide an answer to MC, and that if "killing is wrong" is understood as a *prima facie* belief (or a proto-belief), we still cannot treat it as a moral certainty because it then fails to satisfy the foundational condition.

In connection with the idea that "killing is wrong" cannot be reduced to a visceral reaction, consider the following. When we say "x is wrong" we do not merely refer to the fact that we dislike something, or that we are horrified, or moved, by it. Instead, a propositional representation of our visceral reaction might be something like "Killing? Argh!" This might be part of, but it does not exhaust the content of "killing is wrong." When we say, "x is wrong," we do so for *reasons*.¹¹ So, even if we had an immediate sense of repulsion about killing – "Killing? Argh!" – that would only be *a part* of what we call moral judgment. Consider the following scenario:

Lucy is going to study abroad. Unfortunately, she cannot take Peter, her beloved dog, with her. Although her parents never liked Peter, they agreed to take care of him during her stay abroad. One year later, she receives a call. It's her parents. They tell her that they want to euthanise Peter. Horrified, and suspecting that they just want to get rid of him, she says, "You have no right to do that. It is wrong to kill him." After a discussion, she discovers that her parents had developed a loving relationship with the dog, and that they had decided to euthanise him because he had a disease that was making him suffer. So, she finally agrees that euthanasia is the right thing to do.

At first, i.e. at time T1, Lucy has an immediate dislike of killing and thinks it is wrong to kill Peter. She holds both "Killing? Argh!" and that "Killing Peter is wrong." Then, after discussing and understanding the situation at T2, she changes her mind to "It is right to kill him." Although she still feels "Killing? Argh!" she nonetheless holds that "Killing is right." Retrospectively, she would say that at T1 she *merely* had a visceral reaction, and that her fully-fledged moral judgment was formulated only at T2.

¹⁰ In fact in a recent article Hermann and Pleasants themselves describe certainties as beliefs (cf. O'Hara et al. 2022)

¹¹ Claiming that "x is undisputable" counts as a reason.

MC concerns the possibility of having grounded moral knowledge. It is usually assumed that a belief can be justified only by inference from another justified belief. Hence, since “Killing? Argh!” is a visceral reaction, and since visceral reactions do not have the form of a belief, “Killing? Argh!” cannot be characterised as a moral certainty and does not provide an answer to the moral sceptic.

In other words, the sceptical challenge requires us to provide a foundation for our moral knowledge. To counter it, the Wittgensteinian move consists of providing something that only has the form of a justified true belief but does not actually require further justification. Feelings, however, do not have the form of a belief. They do not express beliefs and cannot be considered certainties. Moreover, “Killing? Argh!” is not undoubtable. We doubt our feelings in a similar way to that in which we doubt knowledge. It is an everyday experience that we get caught by our feelings and we take a step back to assess whether they are appropriate.

One could put one’s foot down at this point and argue that a visceral reaction does indeed have the form of a belief, that such a reaction is better expressed by “killing is wrong” rather than “Killing? Argh!,” and that visceral reactions are to be characterised as *prima facie* beliefs. This does not help us in answering the sceptic anyway, however, because it does not allow us to satisfy the foundational condition: if “Killing? Argh!” were identical to “Killing is wrong,” then, at T2, Lucy would hold “Killing is right” and “Killing is wrong,” and therefore – even if she were dealing with beliefs suited to being certainties – she would hold that two contradictory beliefs are true. This creates a problem where the foundational condition is concerned, since if the sceptic were to challenge Lucy in such a *scenario*, she would end up holding contradictory beliefs and be unable to stop the regress. So, even if we wanted, for the sake of argument, to concede that we all hold something apt to be a certainty like “Killing is wrong,” the foundational condition would remain unsatisfied because what we hold would fail to function as a regress stopper: once the sceptic starts doubting every moral aspect of our knowledge, we will be left with “killing is right” and “killing is wrong.” In other words, the mere fact that, during our upbringing, we can challenge such a claim as “killing is wrong” already shows us that we cannot consider it a certainty.

To summarize, the non-propositional account of “killing is wrong” can be interpreted in two ways. It can be understood as a *prima facie* belief, which can be challenged during our upbringing and therefore leads to a situation where one holds two contradictory beliefs, thereby failing to satisfy the foundational condition. Alternatively, it can be understood as a visceral reaction, or, as we have put it, as “Killing? Argh.” In this case, however, it would not be apt to be a certainty because it would not have the form of a belief.

Another way to see why the notion of non-propositional moral certainty, as developed by Pleasants, fails to address MC is that it confuses causes with reasons. While “Killing? Argh!” may function as the initial causal link prompting us toward a moral judgment, it should not be mistaken for the final link in the chain of reasons that justify that judgment. Visceral reactions may trigger our moral reflection (Cushman et al. 2012), and they might even be necessary for us to engage with a moral issue. However, when we assess whether something is truly a moral problem, we move from explaining causes to offering reasons (Eckl and Deininger 2024). Precisely because visceral responses operate at the causal level, they cannot account for moral certainties, which arise only at the justificatory boundary. Emotional responses might draw us into moral evaluation, but this involvement is not itself a matter of certainty. Certainties, in this context, are found at the end point of justification in argumentation. The non-propositional account, by contrast, offers a causal explanation of what motivates us within a particular language game. Yet “certainty” properly belongs at the borders of the language game of reasons and justification, not within that of cause and effect.

In sum, neither interpretation of “killing is wrong,” be that as a propositional or as non-propositional certainty, succeeds in answering the moral sceptic. Since “killing is wrong” either falls into the category of knowledge or is thought of as a mere visceral reaction, it cannot be understood as a certainty. We will now examine a third, and final, way of addressing the sceptical challenge: through the transcendental interpretation of moral certainties.

4.3 Transcendental certainties

The third approach to moral certainty views certainties as merely formal in nature, referring to them as “transcendental moral certainties” (Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2022). This perspective seeks to identify the “rails” that guide and make our moral discourse intelligible. Following Johnson, proponents of this view regard such foundations as transcendental, as they constitute the preconditions for any meaningful discussion about morality. Johnson provides a clear example where he shows how the nature of certainties makes moves in argumentation possible:

(P3) You owe me €150 from last night’s dinner.

(P4) You also owe me €40 from this morning’s breakfast.

(C2) Therefore, you owe me €190.

We take a further premise for granted here: (P3) that $150 + 40 = 190$. This is an undisputed premise upon which our “splitting the bill” practice is founded. If you were to ask, “How do you conclude that I owe you €190?” I would reply, “Because 150 plus 40 equals 190.” Should you then press further

and ask, “But how do you know that $150 + 40$ equals 190?” I would likely assume you were joking or simply unwilling to pay. Such a question would be as misplaced as asking, during a chess game, “Why does the rook move that way?” At that point, the exasperated chess player might simply exclaim, “Just make your move!”

Deininger, Aigner and Grimm (2022) and Deininger and Grimm (2024) present two candidates of certainties that guide our moral language games: “equals are to be treated equally” and “harming others must be justified.” For example, we cannot but think that we *ought* to provide a reason when we are harming someone intentionally. This serves as a bedrock in our moral language games. These games rely on such certainties. The notion of “hinge propositions” helps us to understand the matter better (e.g., Moyal-Sharrock 2004; Pritchard 2005). Hinges allow us to move things in a certain way. For example, we need hinges to use a door in the way we use it; without them, it would be impossible to move it *properly*. “If I want the door to turn,” says Wittgenstein, “the hinges must stay put” (Wittgenstein 1975, § 343).

Hinge propositions do not only trace the limits of rational discourse. They also allow us to move swiftly from the premises of an argument to its conclusion. As Johnson notes, these are “pseudo-premises” that we murmur when we build an argument. We take them for granted.

“Intentional harm must be justified” provides another example. Someone says:

(P5) If you were to cut that dog open, you would harm it.

(P6) Intentional harm must be justified.

(C3) Therefore you should not cut that dog open.

The move from (P5) and (P6) to the conclusion (C3) is valid, depending on the context and whether the reasons for harming the dog are sound. For example, there might be a situation where someone should cut a dog open. Perhaps cutting it open is the only means by which the dog’s life can be saved. Here, we think we would say that the argument of (P5), (P6) to (C3) must be rejected, because we would be helping the dog. The harm would just be a means to the end of helping the dog.

What does *not* depend on the context, nor require substantiation, is that harming a dog the kind of action that requires justification. We obviously expect some reasons for this kind of act. The point is that we always keep in mind the need for a reason – it is clear that we ought to give some sort of reason when we are inflicting harm intentionally. The proposition “harm ought to be justified” keeps the argument moving and breathes meaning into it. It does so to the extent that we do not have to make it explicit. We already take for granted, and accept, that harm must be justified. Consequently,

one can easily reformulate the argument by silencing the second premise, which is – according to Johnson (2019) – a pseudo-premise, and assert the following:

(P5) If you were to cut that dog open, you would harm it.

(C3) Therefore you should not cut that dog open.

Although (P6) is omitted, or a suppressed premise, we fill the argumentative gap by ourselves; we take it for granted, in every venture into moral discourse, that harm is something that ought to be justified.

Since these hinge propositions have to be understood as rules to be followed and devoid of content, there is no general harm out there that is, *per se*, wrong. In short: “Unwarranted harm is wrong” is a transcendental certainty in the sense that it applies to different contexts and contents. However, whether a particular harm is warranted is highly dependent on the context in which the contents are being debated. The focus now is no longer the content of the propositions. It is the form, or rule, to be followed. We are interested in those unspoken rules that we follow and that constitute the proper moves within a language game.

This last interpretation of certainty as transcendental satisfies the foundational condition because the relevant propositions function as regress stoppers. However, as is true in the case of precepts like “murder is wrong” or “cheating is wrong” (Johnson 2019), although nobody would indeed doubt these propositions, their formal character – which they possess as transcendental certainties – does not allow them to satisfy the substantial condition. In other words, not everybody agrees on what instances shall count as “murder” and as “cheating.” To take another example from Deininger, Aigner and Grimm (2022) two interlocutors might agree that “equals ought to be treated equally,” yet when it comes to applying the principle in practice they might end up with different courses of action, seeing different consequences of the precept, depending on how they understand “equals.” Hence this understanding of moral certainty would not allow us to address the MC. It does not satisfy the “substantial condition,” which requires us to identify content we can agree upon. The problem is the same as the one we noted in connection with “cheating” and “murdering”: although everybody agrees that murder and cheating are wrong, what has yet to be decided is whether particular cases of conduct would count as murder, or count as cheating.

5 Conclusions

By highlighting the purpose of the notion of certainty, we have aimed to systematise and understand the value of the three most prominent accounts of moral certainty in the current debate. The Wittgensteinian response to the epistemic sceptic aims to *dissolve* the sceptical problem by stating that at the end of the chain of reasons lies certainty rather than knowledge. In this case certainties are to be understood as beliefs that cannot be doubted. Hence, responses à la Moore to the sceptic are mistaken, since they confuse hinge propositions with propositions that express knowledge. However, when it comes to moral certainty, we have shown how all three of the accounts we examined fail to provide an answer to the moral sceptic: the problem is that they do not properly address the regress argument, since they do not satisfy the substantial condition.

The fact that the foundational condition *is* satisfied within the transcendental account is a promising step towards responding to the moral sceptic: although the transcendental account does not address the challenge, it may transpire that the moral sceptic is asking too much. After all, though there may be situations where two moral agents disagree on a specific matter, the identification of a transcendental moral certainty allows us to stop the regress, and to show that both are operating on rational, common ground, and that their difference lies in how they see the facts. The question then is whether such rational common ground is sufficient. According to the sceptic it is not, because while transcendental certainties would satisfy the foundational condition, they would not be compliant with the substantial condition. For that compliance it will be necessary to have a shared view and understanding of particular situations. However, showing that two agents are following the same rule, despite ending up with different consequences, is worthwhile. For if they are doing that, they are making similar moves within a *moral* language game that are safeguarded by moral certainties, which provides the basis for exchanging reasons on the same playing field.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Konstantin Deininger, Hannah Winther and Bjørn Myskja for their helpful comments to the paper.

References

Agam-Segal, Reshef. 2014. "When Language Gives Out: Conceptualization and Aspect-Seeing as a Form of Judgment." *Metaphilosophy* 45.

- Ariso José María. 2020. "Why the Wrongness of Killing Innocents is Not a Universal Moral Certainty." *Philosophical Investigations*, 45(1): 58–76.
- Bambrough, Renford. 1979. *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge*. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Brice, Robert Greenleaf. 2013. "Mistakes and Mental Disturbances: Pleasants, Wittgenstein, and Basic Moral Certainty." *Philosophia* 41 (2): 477–87. doi:10.1007/s11406-012-9385-2.
- Christensen, Anne-Marie Søndergaard. 2017. "'What Is Ethical Cannot Be Taught' - Moral Theories as Description of Moral Grammar." In *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought*, edited by Reshef Agam-Segal and Edmund Dain. New York: Routledge.
- . 2021. *Moral philosophy and moral life*. Oxford University Press.
- Coliva, Annalisa & Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle. 2016. Introduction: Hinge Epistemology. *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism*, 6(2-3), 73-78.
- Cuneo, T. & Shafer-Landau, R. 2014 "The Moral Fixed Points: New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 171: 399–443.
- Cushman, Fiery, Kurt Gray, Allison Gaffey, and Wendy Berry Mendes. 2012. "Simulating Murder: The Aversion to Harmful Action." *Emotion* 12 (1): 2–7. doi:10.1037/a0025071.
- Deininger, Konstantin, Andreas Aigner, and Herwig Grimm. 2022. "Resisting Moral Conservatism with Difficulties of Reality: A Wittgensteinian-Diamondian Approach to Animal Ethics." *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 1–19. doi:10.1007/s10790-022-09908-3.
- Deininger, Konstantin and Grimm, Herwig 2024. Certainties and the bedrock of moral reasoning: Three ways the Spade turns. *Analytic Philosophy*.
- Eckl, Konstantin, and Deininger Konstantin. 2024 "A Tempered Rationalism for a Tempered Yuck Factor—Using Disgust in Bioethics." *Asian Bioethics Review* 16.4: 575-594.
- Empiricus, Sextus. 1996. "Outlines of Pyrrhonism." In *The Skeptic Way*, translated by Benson Mates. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fairhurst, Jordi. 2019. Problems in Pleasants' Wittgensteinian Idea of Basic Moral Certainties. *Ethical Perspectives* 26 (2):271-298.
- . 2024. Some concerns about the idea of basic moral certainty: A critical response to Samuel Laves. *Philosophical Investigations*, 47(1), 119-136.
- Hermann, Julia. 2015. *On Moral Certainty, Justification and Practice, A Wittgensteinian Perspective*. England, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781137447180.
- Hutcheson, Frances. 2002. *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*. Edited by Anthony Garrett. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

- Laves, Samuel. 2020. Why Natural Moral Certainties Exist: A Response to Fairhurst. *Ethical Perspectives* 27 (3): 297–315.
- . 2022 “Why the Wrongness of Killing Innocent, Non-Threatening People is a Universal Moral Certainty,” *Philosophical Investigations* 45: 77–90.
- . 2023 "Moral Certainty and Conceptual Deficiency: A Wittgensteinian Critique of the Moral Fixed Points Proposal." *Philosophical Perspectives on Moral Certainty*. Routledge: 156-170.
- Johnson, Jeremy. 2019. “Hitting Moral Bedrock.” In *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*, edited by Oskari Kuusela and Benjamin De Mesel, 196–219. New York: Routledge.
- Joyce, Richard. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kusch, Martin. 2021. “Disagreement, Certainties, Relativism.” *Topoi* 40 (5): 1097–1105. doi:10.1007/s11245-018-9567-z.
- Mackie, John. Lesley. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle. 2004. *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty*. Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9780230504462.
- O'Hara, Neil. 2018. *Moral Certainty and the Foundations of Morality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Hara, Neil, Eriksen, Cecilie, Hermann, Julia., & Pleasants, Nigel, 2022. Introduction: On Moral Certainty. In *Philosophical Perspectives on Moral Certainty* (pp. 1-18). Routledge.
- Pleasants, Nigel. 2008. “Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty.” *Inquiry* 51 (3): 241–67. doi:10.1080/00201740802120673.
- . 2009. “Wittgenstein and Basic Moral Certainty.” *Philosophia* 37 (4): 669. doi:10.1007/s11406-009-9198-0.
- . 2015. “If Killing Isn't Wrong Then Nothing Is.” *Ethical Perspectives* 1 (22): 197-215.
- Pritchard, Duncan. 2005. “Wittgenstein's On Certainty and Contemporary Anti-scepticism.” In *Readings of Wittgenstein's on certainty* (pp. 189-224). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Rummens, Stefan. 2013. “A Wittgensteinian Account of Moral Certainty.” *The Philosophical Forum* 44 (2): 125–47. doi:10.1111/phil.12006.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. 2006. *Moral Skepticisms*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Street, Sharon. 2006. “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value.” *Philosophical Studies* 127(1): 109–166.
- Stroll, Avrum. 1994. *Moore and Wittgenstein on certainty*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. “Internal and External Reasons.” In *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2011 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Routledge.

Williams, Michael. 2004. Wittgenstein, Truth and Certainty. In *Wittgenstein's lasting significance* (pp. 262-297). Routledge.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1975. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th rev. ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Article 4: Who Framed Roger the Rabbit? Autonomy and Ordinary Conceptions of Animals

Sub-research question 2: What kind of reasons do ordinary conceptions of animals ground and what is their relevance for practical reason?

Status: Revised and resubmitted to the *Southern Journal of Philosophy*.

Abstract: Wittgensteinian approaches to animal ethics emphasise the ethical relevance of the ways in which we ordinarily conceive of animals, e.g., as “patients” or “pets.” Against them, Moral individualists argue that we should not derive our reasons for action from these ordinary conceptions as we would run the risk of reinforcing the status quo.

I argue that this concern is warranted only if we treat ordinary conceptions as sources of justificatory reasons. Instead, I propose that they serve as explanatory reasons – reasons that help agents make sense of their actions as their own. Drawing on constitutivist authors, I further argue that understanding one’s actions as one’s own involves understanding them in line with one’s self-conception. This in turn is essential to act autonomously. Thus, ordinary conceptions are morally relevant not because they provide justifications for one’s actions, but because they are necessary for some agents to interact autonomously with other animals.

Keywords: Wittgensteinian animal ethics, constitutivism, explanatory reasons, self-conception, moral individualism.

1 Introduction

Imagine asking your friend Jessica, a veterinarian, whether she would eat her patient, Roger, a rabbit. And she answers, “Of course not, Roger is my patient, and I am his veterinarian.” Is this an appropriate answer? Is the fact that Roger is a patient, and she is his veterinarian a good reason for her to take care of him? Moral individualists, the main orthodoxy in animal ethics would object that the fact that Roger is a patient cannot be the *real reason* guiding her actions because moral consideration to other animals, be they human or non-human, should be granted in accordance with the individual’s capacities that they possess, such as sentience or the capacity to have future-oriented desires (Regan 2004; Palmer 2010; May 2014; Singer 2023).

Against them, ethicists inspired by the work of Wittgenstein (henceforth “Wittgensteinians”) claimed that the ways in which we treat other animals should not be guided by theories that depict animals merely as abstract entities with morally relevant properties. We should rather be guided by the way we conceive them in our everyday life (from now on “ordinary conceptions”) and depict them through thicker conceptualisations that grasp the practices and the relations involving both humans and animals. We encounter, e.g., “pets,” “patients,” “food” and “working animals” and not just beings possessing morally relevant properties. By focusing on an animal’s capacities and depicting them through these conceptions detached from particular contexts, Wittgensteinians claim, we end up losing important nuances of our moral life and distort the way in which moral reasoning works (see e.g., Diamond 1978; Crary 2010; Coghlan 2016; Taylor 2019).

The main worry that arises when considering the Wittgensteinian position is that one risks ending up defending the *status quo*. As Todd May has noticed, “one might refer to what different animals or different kinds deserve based on our practices or our engagement with them” (May 2014, 162). But this risks ending up justifying problematic treatment of animals exactly on the basis that we are used to treat them in such a way: the slaughtering of a cow could then be justified by saying that she is treated exactly how livestock ought to be treated. Such a conclusion is then rejected both because it undermines the very objective that animal ethicists aspire to undertake – a criticism of our current treatment of animals – and because it derives a normative statement from a factual statement without clarifying why the particular fact in question ought to give us reasons for action. Christine M. Korsgaard sums this worry up by stating that: “Practical philosophy should enable us to examine and criticize our attitudes and practices, not just unpack them and enshrine the results in moral trappings” (Korsgaard 2022, 248).

By all appearances, ordinary conceptions seem to provide us at most with an explanation of one's behaviour rather than a justification for it. The fact that Jessica describes Roger as her patient seems to provide us, at best, with a reason *why* she would not eat him – because veterinarians do not eat their patients – rather than a reason she *should* not eat him. It is not immediately obvious in what way such an explanation should be taken to have any ethical relevance.

In other words, to introduce two technical terms, ordinary conceptions would be providing an agent either with *justificatory* or with *explanatory* reasons. If we take them as providing justificatory reasons, we risk ending up justifying the status quo, whereas if we take them as providing explanatory reasons, they do not seem to be of any moral relevance. At first glance, explanatory reasons seem to merely tell us why someone acted the way they did and not whether they should have. And ethicists are usually interested in *how we ought to act*. The fact that we can explain someone's action is not usually understood to help us determine this – at best, it is taken to provide information on how to *nudge* the behaviour in the correct direction (Kasperbauer 2017, 175-180). For moral individualists, then, there is little moral insight to gain from the ways in which we already think about animals.

Does this mean that the Wittgensteinian intuition of the moral relevance of ordinary conceptions of animals is off track? I don't think so. But we must consider more precisely what this "moral relevance" might be. Some Wittgensteinian authors have, for example, argued that thinking about animals through thicker conceptions allows us to engage with our moral imagination – a form of moral thinking that moral individualists have failed to appreciate – and explore our moral life beyond the realm of obligation (Diamond 1982; Crary 2009).

I will provide an alternative answer by following a constitutivist moral psychology – particularly that of Korsgaard and David J. Velleman – and argue that these conceptions provide the necessary ground for some agents to act autonomously. As I will show, these authors share the idea that for an agent to act autonomously, they must be able to understand their action as stemming from the kind of person that they take themselves to be (Korsgaard 2009; Velleman 2009). By relying on this definition, I aim to show that ordinary conceptions are necessary for some agent to act autonomously because they allow them to make sense of their actions as their own: Jessica needs to conceive of Roger as a patient for her to act as a veterinarian, and acting as a veterinarian is necessary for her to act autonomously (more on why this is the case below).

Following a constitutivist approach, this problem can then be framed as a problem in practical reason. That is, an agent's capacity to reflect about how one should act and entertain reason for their actions. By relying on such capacity, we, rational beings, are able to act autonomously. At least according to

the kind of autonomy that constitutivists are interested in. We have the capacity to reflect on which actions would align with the kind of person we understand ourselves to be and to decide in favour or against them. We can consider the reasons behind our actions, and these reasons, as I will explain, can be seen as justificatory when we view our actions as justified, or as explanatory when we are able to make sense of them.

The core of this argument pivots around the idea that when deciding how to act, we reflect on reasons for our actions and that ordinary conceptions of animals underpin such reasons. I have claimed that if we base justificatory reasons on such conceptions, we risk ending up justifying the status quo whereas appealing to them as explanatory reasons would do us no good since they lack moral relevance. I need to challenge at least one of these two claims in order to make sense of the idea that ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary for some agents to act autonomously and are therefore of moral relevance.

I will challenge the second claim and argue that explanatory reasons are relevant for an agent's action as they are necessary for them to understand their actions as their *own* actions and thereby act autonomously. The argument of this paper can be divided into the substantiation of four claims:

- 1) The ways in which animals are conceived provide us with reasons for action.
- 2) These reasons can be either understood as *explanatory* or *justificatory* reasons.
- 3) Ordinary conceptions of animals underpin explanatory reasons.
- 4) Explanatory reasons are necessary for an agent to act autonomously.

From these we can draw the following conclusion:

- C) Ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary for some agents to act autonomously.

In the first part of the paper, I will address the first three claims by clarifying my understanding of explanatory and justificatory reasons and explain what I mean when I say that ordinary conceptions can provide explanatory reasons. In the second part I will address claim 4 – that explanatory reasons are necessary for an agent to act autonomously and draw the conclusion of the argument. Finally, I will discuss in what way my results bear on moral individualism. However, since moral individualism is concerned with justificatory reasons, I will need to flesh out the relation between explanatory and justificatory reasons and will argue that those of the justificatory kind need to be encompassed by those of the explanatory kind for them to justify *autonomous actions*. Note, then, that the distinction I draw between explanatory and justificatory reasons is not an ontological one. I am not interested in determining what their *nature* is. My interest here lies in the *function* these reasons serve from the

first-person perspective of the agent who asks, “How should I act?” As I will clarify later, some reasons can be understood as both explanatory *and* justificatory, depending on the context.

The payoff of this article is that I will show that a viable conception of animal ethics cannot dispense with ordinary conceptions. Far from being unnecessary or superfluous, ordinary conceptions are often a necessary condition for autonomous action in our interaction with animals. A theory which does not acknowledge the role of pets, patients, research subjects etc. – be it moral individualists or not – is simply incomplete.

2 Animals and Practical Reason

I now turn to claims 1 and 2: that the ways in which we conceive of animals provide us with reasons for action. I can conceive of Roger as a sentient being, I can conceive of him as Eddie’s pet, and I can conceive of him as a mammal with fur and ears. These are all ways of conceptualising the animal, where “conception” here refers broadly to different ways of understanding them, ranging from scientific classifications (e.g., mammal, organism) to philosophical moral discourse (e.g., sentient being) and ordinary language (e.g., pet).¹ These conceptions can provide us with reasons.² For example, if I conceive of Roger as a furry mammal, I will have reasons not to let him jump on my sofa. If he is Eddie’s pet, I will have reasons not to set him free in the woods. If I find out that he is edible, I will have reasons to eat him, but the fact that he is Eddie’s pet will give me other reasons not to. Moreover, if I conceive of Roger as Eddie’s pet, I will think that Eddie has reasons to grieve if he dies.

These examples allow us to establish two points: firstly, that different ways of conceiving Roger determine, at least in part, the *content* of the reasons. This content varies depending on the way in which Roger is conceived: the fact that Roger is a furry mammal provides me with reasons not to let him on the sofa but not with reasons to set him free in the woods.³ The fact that Roger is Eddie’s pet

¹ Notice that, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, even concepts like “organism” or “sentient being” can be seen as ordinary conceptions, since their meaning is determined by the language games and practices in which they are used – e.g., the concept “organism” gains its meaning also in the practices constituting scientific research. I will, however, focus on more mundane conceptions, as these have been largely overlooked in contemporary animal ethics.

² It is tempting to say that one has reasons to act in some way only if the way in which they conceptualise the animal is *true*. And that, for example, it is the *fact* that Roger is a pet that gives me reasons to take care of him rather the fact that I conceive of him as a pet. This clarification makes room for situations in which we want to say that the agent is mistaken in thinking they have reasons to treat Roger in a certain way. I am sympathetic to this view. My focus, however, lies elsewhere. I am interested in exploring what counts as a reason *from the agent’s own perspective*. If reasons cannot enter that perspective through the way she conceives of the world, then they are not reasons that can make sense to her.

³ It would be more precise to say that a specific conception of an animal provides the enabling condition for someone to have a reason. As I will show later, the mere fact that an animal is conceived in a certain way does not, by itself, suffice for there to be a reason. There must also be some normative ground in the case of justificatory reasons or some broader understanding of the world in the case of explanatory reasons.

allows me to explain Eddie's grief if Roger dies, but it does not provide me with reasons to think that he is a rabbit (Eddie could also have other animals as pets).

The second point is something I had already anticipated: that the term "reason" can be used in both a justificatory and an explanatory sense. When saying that Eddie has a reason to grieve Roger's death because he is his pet, the term reason could mean either that Eddie is justified in grieving Roger – in the sense that he is having an appropriate reaction – or that it explains to someone why Eddie is having such a reaction. We understand that most people care greatly about their pets, and we know that pet owners tend to grieve them after they pass away.

So, depending on the conception we have of an animal, we will have reasons with different contents. Moreover, these reasons can be understood in both an explanatory and a justificatory sense. My aim here is to argue that among the various conceptions of animals, ordinary conceptions are morally relevant because of their role in providing explanatory reasons, which, in turn, play an essential role in an agent's autonomy. To do so, I will need to explain how these conceptions provide explanatory reasons and in what way these are relevant for an agent's autonomy. But before doing so, I will discuss more generally how the way animals are conceived – also as mere beings possessing morally relevant capacities – provides us with justificatory reasons. This analysis will be crucial for the final discussion on the implications of my argument for moral individualism.

2.1 Animals and Justificatory Reasons

Justificatory reasons can be understood as "reasons-for," or "reasons counting in favour of" an action. The rough idea is that an agent has a justificatory reason for an action if there is a normative ground – be it a principle, a norm, an intuition etc. – that makes that action right. These normative grounds upon which a reason obtains do not need to be moral ones, one could justify one's action by referring to norms of etiquette, desires or on aesthetic, prudential or legal considerations, etc. In this paper, I will focus primarily on justificatory reasons of the moral kind. That is, reasons which count in favour of an action in virtue of some moral fact. Accordingly, I will use "justificatory reasons" to refer exclusively to moral reasons, and I will clearly indicate when discussing reasons based on non-moral considerations.⁴

Imagine that Jessica has a sudden desire to eat Roger's meat. We can say that she has a reason to eat him because he is made of flesh. She also has, however, a reason not to eat him because veterinarians are required not to eat their patients (at least not without the consensus of the patient's owner). In the former case, it is then the desire to eat Roger and the fact that he is conceived of as a being made of

⁴ Granted that it is possible to identify distinctively moral principles.

flesh that gives her a reason to eat him, whereas in the latter case, it is a rule stemming from her professional role and from the fact that Roger is conceived of as a patient that justify her in curbing her impulse to eat him.

This shows two things: first, that we can have different reasons depending on different ends, e.g., those ends established by the standards defined by our professional role, the objects of our desires, or prudential or moral principles; and second that these reasons can come into conflict with each other. Hence, an agent will never act according to all the reasons that they have at their disposal. These will only be *prima facie* reasons. Only some will count as decisive reasons.

Justificatory reasons can be distinguished from other reasons for action because their *function* is to provide a moral justification for the agent's action. For example, they might indicate whether an agent has a moral obligation to animals. The normative basis of these reasons is usually moral principles⁵ and even though there is no shared agreement on which principles qualify as moral – and therefore which among the reasons one has qualify as justificatory reasons – I take it that to count as such, these reasons must satisfy at least two conditions. First, a justificatory reason must be able to bring about reflection. An agent cannot simply cite a contingent fact – such as an animal's status as their pet – as a stopping point in reasoning. Justificatory reasons must allow for the possibility of questioning one's own position. Second, a justificatory reason's function is that of being *generalisable*, meaning that the fact they appeal to must not be arbitrarily restricted to particular cases but must apply in analogous situations. So if I say that the *sole* reason why I helped an animal was the fact that they were my patient, I will only have reasons to help other animals if they are my patients.

Among the more substantial moral principles that ground justificatory reasons all moral individualists share the principle of equal consideration which states that we ought to treat equals alike. Singer, for example, identifies the capacity of having interests as a common ground that unites us and other animals and argues that we ought to follow the principle of equal consideration of interests which states that we should “give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions” (Singer 2011, 20).

Moreover, as Todd May observes, moral individualists base their arguments on animals' capacities (May 2014). According to them, we do not owe moral consideration to animals because they happen to be in a particular relationship or involved in a specific practice. Rather, we owe them moral consideration because of their sentience, their capacity for future-oriented desires or other capacities

⁵ Some particularist and/or anti-theorists would disagree and claim that the reasonableness of an action does not depend on the existence of moral principles. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will leave this worry aside as moral individualists and constitutivism accept the grounding of reasons in moral principles as a given.

(e.g., Regan 2004). These qualities are sufficient grounds for treating them in the same way we treat humans who possess the same morally relevant capacities.

Notice that, for moral individualism, there are two components that make it possible for an agent to have justificatory reasons: a moral principle (e.g., the principle of equal consideration) and a particular conception of the animal (e.g., as a being with interest). If moral individualists did not abide by the principle of equal consideration, they would still need to explain in what sense an animal's capacity should be of any moral relevance.⁶ One could, for example, follow the principle of "inflicting the most suffering on every sentient being but myself" and take an animal's sentience as a reason to make them suffer. Alternatively, if they were committed to the principle of equality but believed that the only morally relevant aspect of a being is its status as our friend, then it would not follow that we must treat all sentient beings alike – only those sentient beings that are also our friends.

Because moral individualists uphold the principle of equality and maintain that an animal's capacities alone are sufficient to establish their moral status, they would reject Jessica's claim that Roger deserves moral consideration simply because he is her patient. More precisely, they would object if Jessica argued that she is morally justified in treating Roger as worthy of moral consideration solely based on their particular relationship.

2.2 Ordinary Conceptions and Justificatory Reasons

When Jessica says that it is the mere fact that Roger is a patient that gives her reasons for taking care of him, she might mean two things: She could either be saying that since Roger is a patient, he deserves preferential treatment. This does not necessarily mean that other rabbits do not deserve moral consideration but rather that Jessica has specific obligations to Roger that she does not have to other rabbits. Now, notice that even though the particular relation in which Roger stands to Jessica enters the picture, this account can still be understood as moral individualism, as the fact that Roger deserves moral consideration at all is still grounded in his capacities. Clare Palmer, for example, recognises that we have negative duties towards every animal, but argues that we have positive duties only to animals that have been made vulnerable by human action (Palmer 2010). This means that even though Jessica would have the duty not to interfere with the life of any rabbit, her duty to help would be directed exclusively to those rabbits that happen to be in specific relations with human beings.

An alternative way to interpret Jessica's claim would be the following: She might mean that she has obligations to Roger *only* in virtue of him being a patient and not because of his capacities. In this

⁶ To be more precise, they would also need to be committed to some principle that prevents one from inflicting harm to oneself or one's fellow humans.

case any moral consideration whatsoever would be granted to Roger only in virtue of his role as a patient in the practice of veterinary medicine. This would be an example of a view that grounds justificatory reasons not in the animal's intrinsic capacities, but solely in the way the animal is conceived within a particular practice. The fact that Roger is a patient gives Jessica reasons to care about his worth in the first place. Were Roger to be a wild rabbit, Jessica would be justified in hunting him down and eat him. She would not be required to consider the fact that Roger is sentient as giving her reasons to treat him as if he deserved moral consideration.

The latter is the position that a moral individualist would oppose and that is attributed to the Wittgensteinians.⁷ In fact, Jessica would end up being committed to an untenable form of conservatism that would end up justifying the status quo: If Jessica claims to be justified in treating Roger as a patient because he is her patient, she would still need to explain why being a patient provides her with a justification. There needs to be some moral principle upon which her claim is justified. The mere fact that Roger is a patient cannot *per se* provide her with a reason to act in a certain way.⁸ So, what could this implicit moral principle be?

There seem to be only two possible options: she might be saying that she always ought to treat animals according to the practices in which they are encountered or that she ought to act according to her role as a veterinarian. If we were concerned more broadly with justificatory reasons and not specifically with those of the moral kind, this would not constitute a problem. In fact, if she were merely interested in doing her job well, then treating Roger as a patient and fulfilling her duties as a veterinarian would be the right course of action to take. But I am now talking about justificatory reasons of the moral kind. And it seems quite problematic to accept the idea that doing one's job or treating an animal as it is encountered in practice are sufficient reasons for one to be morally off the hook. If such an idea would suffice to establish that Jessica is morally justified it would mean that in each situation in which someone treats an animal according to the particular practice in which the animal finds itself or in any situation in which they act according to their professional role they are acting morally. Were Jessica a hunter she would not need to provide any further justification for her action as she would be already justified in virtue of acting according to the rules of a practice or according to the rules of her professional role. The former would provide justifications for any practice in virtue of the fact that we are dealing with that very practice and the latter just passes the buck to one's professional role and

⁷ I am not committed to the claim that Wittgensteinian share this position, some of them do in fact seem to claim that we have *obligations* to treat other animals depending on the way in which we conceive in our everyday lives (Coghlan 2016), others seem to be rather uninterested with the very idea of *moral obligation* altogether (Diamond 1982).

⁸ Of course, she might claim that Roger is a patient and that that's just how she treats her patients. and that she does not need to further explain or justify her actions. This answer is not acceptable, first because she would leave rational discourse all together, and secondly because this answer could justify any obscenity and atrocity one can imagine.

justifies any behaviour in virtue of the professional role one is playing. As if the bewildered hitman could protest, mid-arrest, that he was just doing his job. In other words, by merely pointing out at the practice she is involved in or at the role she is occupying Jessica is neither reflecting on her action nor is she providing an acceptable principle that we would generalise. And by failing to do so she is failing to provide us with justificatory reasons.

However, this does not mean, that we should discard the role of ordinary conceptions from practical reason altogether. In fact, even if we reject the position according to which Jessica is morally justified to act according to the demands of her professional role, we should take seriously the role that her identity as a veterinarian plays in determining the kinds of reasons she is able to entertain. The use of stating one's professional role to give reasons for one's action is a very common practice and on a pre-reflective level there seems nothing wrong with it. So how do we make sense of this common practice?

I suggest we do so by shifting our focus from justificatory reasons to explanatory reasons. It is then time to argue for claim 3: "Ordinary conceptions of animals give rise to explanatory reasons." To argue for it I will however need to make a little detour and clarify what I mean by "explanatory reasons."

2.3 Animals and Explanatory Reasons

The distinction between explanatory and justificatory reasons can be understood in terms of the former being "reasons-why" and the latter "reasons-for" (Velleman 2004b, 279). As Velleman puts it: "Having Parkinson's disease can be the reason why someone trembles without in any way being a reason for him to tremble – which is to say, it can explain without justifying" (Velleman 2004b, 279). When one answers the question of why an agent is performing a particular action, they are giving reasons that aim to explain and to make sense of the action. These are considerations in light of which we can gain an understanding of an action and make it intelligible as stemming from the person who caused it. Since they usually do so in reference to "motives, traits and other dispositions of the character (Velleman 2009, 13), the understanding they give us "is a folk-psychological understanding" (Velleman 2009, 13), meaning that these explanations do not employ concepts developed by empirical psychologist but rather by ordinary people. People who did not specialize in scientific psychology still give explanation to each other and to themselves to make sense of other's behaviours and actions: "he ran away because he is a coward," "she decided to stay because she's in love with him," or "of course he got angry, he is her father!" These might not be correct explanations in the sense that they might be inaccurate, vague or even contradicting with scientific theories about

human behaviour, but they still allow the person who is giving or receiving such explanation to make sense of the world they witness (Goldie 2004, 128). And – as I will show now – this will be sufficient to explain its relevance for practical reason.

We can give explanatory reasons and explain someone's action only by relying on a particular conception that we have of the agent – the action makes sense to us as performed by that particular person. So, for example, it makes sense to us that Eddie gets particularly angry if Roger were abused in light of the fact that we know that Eddie is Roger's owner.

To clarify this idea, it is helpful to borrow Velleman's metaphor of agents as actors (Velleman 2009). An agent, just like an actor, plays a role in light of which their action make sense to an audience: if one is playing Harlequin, his actions need to reflect an astute and insatiable servant and not, for example, those of a greedy and lecherous man as Pantalone. If confronted with the options of reading a good book or stealing a cornucopia of food, it will make sense for Harlequin to do the latter as that is what would be expected of the character. If we see Harlequin entering a room where he can choose between stealing an apple or a book we would expect him to take the former. Were he to take the latter we would need a further explanation for why he would do so – maybe for selling it and buying more food. Instead, if he would start reading the book we would need to change our shared conception of him. We would realise that Harlequin's hunger is not only directed at food but at knowledge as well.

Moreover, besides one's psychological dispositions we can explain one's behaviour in virtue of the role they might be playing: we might explain why a person saved a choking passerby's life through a tracheotomy by saying that they are a medical doctor (see also Velleman 2014, 7). Of course – one might object – the fact that the person is a doctor is not a satisfactory explanation as such an explanation requires some psychological disposition in the chain of causes that led to the state of affair at hand. For example, we would require postulating the existence of a desire in the doctor's mind to explain why they acted: the agent must be motivated by something, and a role is not a mental state that can bring someone to act.

To respond to this, we may say that first and foremost, referencing someone's desire does not really provide us with a complete explanation anyhow: I could have been moved by the desire to save that person just as well, but without medical training there would have been little I could do. Referencing to someone's professional role comes with a background of the kind of activities that we suppose this person is able to do. So, the kind of role and the capacities that this person has are an essential part of the explanation. Secondly, we could reformulate our answer of "they are a doctor" to the more

cumbersome “that person is driven by the desire to fulfil their role as a doctor”⁹ without failing to acknowledge the importance of the person’s role.

In any case, the important thing for the argument to work is that someone’s role can provide an – at least partial – explanation for someone’s action. That is, that the fact that someone fulfils a certain role provides us with a reason that allows us to make sense and therefore to explain why they acted in a particular way. We can explain Jessica’s concern with Roger in virtue of the fact that she is his veterinarian.

I have now argued that having a specific character or impersonating a specific role provides us with a ground that allows us to have explanatory reasons to make sense of an agent’s action. What I need to show now, is that also ordinary conceptions of animals do so.

2.4 Ordinary Conceptions and Explanatory Reasons

The reason why ordinary conceptions of animals provide us with explanatory reasons too is fairly straightforward: someone’s action only make sense in a context. Jessica’s actions cannot be explained in terms of her being a veterinarian if she does not have any patients. Actions only make sense in a context, and contexts are made of material objects and inhabited through social practices. So, for example, a man that moves his hand back and forth in front of him might be cleaning his window or saying goodbye to his wife leaving on a train. We can understand his actions only if we see the train in front of him and we are aware of the social practice of saying farewell by waving one’s hand. The material conditions in which we find ourselves provide the solid ground upon which our actions make sense. And animals are part of these material conditions.

To borrow again Velleman’s metaphor: actors need a scene and other elements to support their actions (Velleman 2009, 71). And animals are among these elements, sometimes as scenic objects, sometimes as fellow actors. Willingly or not, they are part of the scenarios in which agents act. They constitute the background upon which an agent’s action makes sense. The fact that we can conceptualise Roger as a patient allows us to make sense of Jessica’s role as a veterinarian: Roger becomes part of the context in which it makes sense for Jessica to act as a veterinarian. It is in this sense that ordinary conceptions ground explanatory reasons: they allow us to properly make sense of an agent’s action by providing the fitting context. A world without pets, circus animals and pests would be a world without animal-owners, tamers and exterminators.

⁹ To this it might be objected that “the desire to fulfil their role as a doctor” could be broken down even more. For instance, one might argue that the real explanation is that the person is actually driven by the desire to emulate their father’s role who was also that of a doctor. For the present purposes it does not matter that we have the *real* explanation but rather a reason that can constitute at least a superficial explanation that makes sense.

Hence, the fact that we conceptualise animals through ordinary conceptions allows us to make sense of an agent's action as those actions that a veterinarian would do. In this sense ordinary conceptions of animals can be understood as providing explanatory reasons: they allow us to make sense of an agent by making sense of their actions as stemming from a particular role they play in a particular context surrounded by scenic objects and fellow actors. They hold together the meaning of the concept "veterinarian" by giving it a context in which it makes sense to use it. It would not make sense to us to explain Jessica's actions in virtue of the fact that she is a veterinarian if we couldn't conceive of Roger and the other animals she has to take care for as "patients." We can go as far as to say that ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary in order to understand someone's action as, for example, a veterinarian. Even though it is neither a logical nor a metaphysical necessity it is a necessity dictated by the rules governing our language and our practices.

3 Explanatory Reasons and Autonomy

The aim of this paper is to show that ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary for some agents to act autonomously. And to do so, I have anticipated that we need to understand these conceptions as providing an agent with reasons for acting, in particular with explanatory reasons. However, I have so far shown only how ordinary conceptions of animals can provide someone observing an agent with the ground for explanatory reasons to make sense of the agent's behaviour. I still have to explain in what way they are relevant for the agent who is acting. In other words, it is not clear how they are relevant for practical reason, understood as the capacity for an agent to reflect about how one should act and entertain reasons for their actions.

Explanatory reasons are those reasons that allow us to make sense of and explain someone else's action. But they do not tell us how we should act – that is the role of justificatory reasons. A first step to make sense of this is to realise that the spectators need to make sense of what Harlequin is doing when he is stealing Pantalone's property (acting rather than robbing him) to provide an appropriate response (applauding rather than calling the police). We need to have an understanding of the person in order to know how to treat them. But what about Harlequin himself: why should he also be able to explain his own actions? And if an explanation is grounded on the conception that we have of that person, then what role does their self-conception play in their actions? In general terms: What function do explanatory reasons play in their autonomy? To answer this question, I will need to clarify what I mean by "autonomy."

3.1 Autonomy and Self-conception

Autonomy is usually taken to refer to an agent's capacity for self-governance. An agent's autonomy is their capacity to choose to act according to the reasons that they themselves endorse. The problem of autonomy is often framed like a problem that an agent faces when trying to establish themselves, rather than other factors, as the cause of their actions (e.g., Velleman 2004a; Korsgaard 2009, 59-80). In fact, their actions could be determined by factors outside of the agent's control, for example by external forces, by other people's physical coercion or by their own internal compulsion or desires. Now, imagine Jessica is holding a scalpel ready to conduct a surgery on Roger. What would it mean for Jessica to perform the operation autonomously? *She* should be the one moving her hand. It can't be someone else coercing her and move her hand in her place. Nor can she be moved by random thoughts or desires: Imagine that Roger is Eddie's rabbit. And Eddie is Jessica's ex-boyfriend who cheated on her; and during the surgery she is suddenly caught by an intrusive thought: "just kill Roger, Eddie loves this rabbit, he will pay for what he has done to me." Were she to let her intrusive thought win or to be guided by someone else's action, she would be acting as if she were determined by some heterogeneous – which is to say, non-autonomous – principle. What we want from our actions is that they are not merely caused by some blind impulse *in* ourselves but rather by *ourselves*. So how can we act autonomously?

Constitutivists share the idea that for an action to count as autonomous, it must express the self-conception of the agent who is acting (see Shapiro 1999; Velleman 2006; Korsgaard 2009). This is for them a *necessary* but not sufficient condition for autonomy. On top of that, Korsgaard, for example, argues that an autonomous agent is such only in so far as they act according to the categorical imperative (Korsgaard 2009, 81-108), whereas Velleman argues that we are driven by self-understanding and that we act autonomously when our actions are modelled on the kinds of action that would make sense for us to do given the understanding that we have of ourselves (Velleman 2009). For the purpose of this paper, we do not need to decide which approach is the correct one. I am interested in the necessary and not in the sufficient conditions for autonomy. In fact, my argument aims to show that ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary for some agents to act autonomously not that they are sufficient. And to argue for this claim – as I will now show – it will be sufficient to accept that an agent can act autonomously only if they act according to the conception that they have of themselves.¹⁰

¹⁰ Perhaps one might think that there are cases in which someone acts autonomously without needing to have a conception of themselves. Perhaps they would argue that some animals are indeed autonomous, but they lack a conception of themselves. I will not be able to address this issue here. However, the argument that I have presented might be still

To see how that is the case try to think about situations in which you did *not* act according to the conception that you have of yourself. Think about all the situations in which you acted in a way that caught you by surprise: all those situations in which you did something that you could not clearly square with yourself and lament “I do not know what got into me!” “It’s not like me to be such a jerk!” In these circumstances you did something that you cannot clearly square with the conception that you have of yourself and end up needing either to modify such conception by integrating further elements – “I guess I am becoming more callous” – or you attribute the causes of your actions to something else – “I must have been distracted by the horrible news!” When taking responsibility for our action we define ourselves in a particular way – we take a stance on the kind of person we are.

Now, let us go back to Jessica with the scalpel in her hand. She has just been caught by the intrusive and vindictive thought of killing Roger. She is confronted with various options on how to act. From her point of view, there will be some actions that make sense according to the conception that she has of herself: she thinks of herself as a vindictive person who could kill Roger – who has become a “means-for-revenge” – but also as a veterinarian who has duties to her patients and more probably as a decent person who would not just kill a rabbit to hurt her ex.

Usually, constitutivists would now go on to try to understand which principle the actor would have to appeal to in order for the choice to count as autonomous: Korsgaard, for example, would claim that Jessica should act according to the categorical imperative whereas Velleman would claim that she needs to act in a way that makes sense with the overall understanding that she has of herself. We need not take a position on this. The only important aspect of Jessica’s situation to consider for the present purpose, is that for her to even start deciding which will be the right action she will need to have been able to think of herself as “Jessica the vindictive ex-girlfriend,” “Jessica the decent person” or “Jessica the veterinarian.” All of these conceptions that she has of herself would allow her to make sense of the various actions that she could perform – killing the rabbit, going on with the surgery – as her *own* actions. Only after having being able to consider those actions as her own actions can she decide whether she ought or not to perform them. In other terms, before deciding what reasons she has for some actions she needs to be able to make sense of them *as her own* – to explain why *she* would do them.

worthwhile considering and accept that that *some* autonomous actions – like those that we do in public and for which we take responsibility– require such a self-conception. And that these actions are an essential component in our life.

3.2 Autonomy and Explanatory Reasons

We have, then, almost reached the conclusion of the argument: I have promised at the beginning to argue that ordinary conceptions can, under certain circumstances, be necessary for an agent to act autonomously. And I have claimed that they can do this because they ground explanatory reasons.

Right now, I have argued that an agent acts autonomously only if their actions make sense to them as stemming from the conceptions that they have of themselves. But this is the same thing as saying that an agent must have some explanatory reasons for their action which, in turn, are grounded on the conception that the agent has of themselves. In Velleman's words: "There is a definition of 'making sense' under which it is a term of practical rationality. What makes sense for someone to do by this definition, is whatever he has a reason for doing." And "reasons for doing something are considerations in light of which it would make sense [to act]." This is because these reasons are "considerations that would provide the subject with an explanatory grasp of the behavior for which they are reasons" (Velleman 2004b, 280). If one's explanation of one's actions necessarily relies on one's self-conception, this "explanatory grasp" is then made possible by the fact that the agent has a conception of themselves according to which some actions will make more or less sense for them to do. But if acting autonomously means to act according to one's self-conception, then to act autonomously the agent must have explanatory reasons for their actions. In other words, they need to make sense of their actions as *their own* actions in order to be autonomous. To act autonomously, the agent needs to be able to explain their actions as those actions that would be done by the kind of person that they take themselves to be. Hence, explanatory reasons – as per claim 4 – are necessary for autonomous action.

Since I have shown that ordinary conceptions of animals can ground explanatory reasons, there might be – and indeed are – cases where such conceptions are necessary for an agent to act autonomously. These would be cases where an agent's self-conception depends on ordinary conceptions of animals. Before providing examples of such agents, it is important to notice that my conclusion can be interpreted in two different ways: the first way would be to understand "autonomously" as referring exclusively to the agent's capacity to understand their actions as their own *only when interacting with other animals*. Let's call it the *discrete interpretation*. A second interpretation, the *continuous interpretation*, would understand the term "autonomously" more broadly and express the idea that it is the agent's capacity to make sense of their actions in all aspects of their life that rests on ordinary conceptions of animals. In the first case it is only a particular conception of the agent that rests on ordinary conceptions, whereas in the latter ordinary conceptions of animals hold together the agent's core self-conception, on which every action of the agent is ultimately grounded – what Korsgaard

would call “practical identity” (Korsgaard 1996, 101), and Velleman describes as an agent’s overall understanding of themselves (Velleman 2009).

For the discrete interpretation let’s go back to Jessica. Her encounters with animals were always shaped by two contexts: the farm where she grew up and the clinic where she became a veterinarian. Throughout her life, Jessica always encountered animals only as workers, livestock, pets, or patients, and has accordingly come to understand herself as “Jessica the farmer,” “Jessica the pet-owner” and “Jessica the veterinarian.” None of these conceptions are essential to her, though. She values herself much more as, say, “Jessica the impartial” and “Jessica the mother.”

For the continuous interpretation, take Mr. Doom, a hunter who has come to value and understand himself as such while growing up in a community of hunters who take their identity as hunters to be not only a social role constitutive of their form of life, but an ideal one should aspire to. For Mr. Doom and his community, a hunter isn’t just someone who tracks and kills quarry, it is also someone who, by doing so, represents courage, discipline and loyalty to their kin, all virtues their community is built upon. It is an ideal around which the members of his community organize their shared way of life.¹¹

Both Jessica and Mr. Doom have come to make sense of animals only within practices embedded in their respective ways of life, which in turn have shaped their self-understanding. If a law would prohibit Jessica from treating animals as patients, pets, and working animals, and Mr. Doom from treating them as quarry, their autonomy would be undermined. For Jessica, this limitation would be less significant, as her core self-conception does not depend on her relationships with animals. For Mr. Doom the consequences would be much more severe, however, since the possibility of being a hunter – and of becoming an ideal hunter – are the very aims around which his life gains its form. The very fabric of his way of life rests on conceiving animals as quarry.¹²

Despite these differences, for people like Mr. Doom and Jessica the conclusion that I promised to reach holds: ordinary conceptions of animals are necessary for some agents to act autonomously (to varying degrees). It is now time to discuss how this conclusion bears on moral individualism.

¹¹ For more on how self-understanding and autonomy rely on social roles, see Jonathan Lear’s analysis of social roles and ideals in the Crow nation (Lear 2006).

¹² Lear’s discussion of the Crow’s subjectivity is exemplary in this regard. He argues that a Crow’s self-understanding was inextricably tied to the possibility of identifying with and aspiring to embody social roles such as warrior, chief, or hunter, each defined by particular standards of excellence. As he puts it, “[n]ot being able to identify with a social role would threaten one’s identity as a Crow tout court” (Lear 2006, 49) to the extent that being a Crow required “making those ideals a life’s task” (Lear 2006, 43).

4 Concluding discussion – Autonomy and Moral Individualism

What implications does my argument have for moral individualists? Since moral individualists are concerned with justificatory reasons, the answer to this issue hinges on the connection between explanatory and justificatory reasons.

I have argued that ordinary conceptions are necessary for some agents to have explanatory reasons for their actions but – as discussed in section 2.2 – we should be cautious to accept them as providing justificatory reasons. Nevertheless, I have established a basis for one final conclusion: *justificatory reasons must be construable as explanatory reasons for an agent to act autonomously on them.*

For an agent to act autonomously, they must understand their actions as their own, which requires making sense of those actions through explanatory reasons. So, *if* autonomy is a condition for moral action, then the justificatory reasons for an agent's actions must also be explanatory. In Velleman's words "justifying reasons must be capable of entering into explanatory reasons, since a reason for acting must have the potential to influence a rational agent, in which case it may become a part of the reason why he acts" (Velleman 2004b, 279) so that a "reason for which someone acts is a consideration that explains his action because he responded to it as if it justified" (Velleman 2004b, 279) his action. This means that to act autonomously on justificatory reasons, an agent must be able to conceive of themselves as someone who would endorse such reasons.¹³ Consequently, for an agent to take the justificatory reasons set forth by moral individualism as ground for their actions, they must be able to conceive of themselves as someone who would endorse moral individualism. To see, then, how the argument I have put forth bears on moral individualism, I must first illustrate how an agent has to conceive of themselves to follow the moral individualist's demands autonomously.

The kind of person moral individualism requires us to conceive ourselves as is one who holds that our reasons for determining how an individual should be treated are grounded exclusively in that individual's capacities, such as sentience, and a principle of equality, to the exclusion of any factors specific to the agent making the judgment (e.g., Rachels 1990, 173-177; Regan 2004, 121-131; de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, 133). Another way of describing such a conception of the agent is to say that it is an *impartial* agent (Linder 2023, 144) who sees "human beings *as merely amongst* the many possible entities that can think, feel, etc." (Gaita 2004, 168; *italics in original*; see also Diamond 1978). Moral individualism requires us to think of ourselves as neutral and impartial agents capable

¹³ Notice that I am only referring to justificatory reasons *that an agent can act upon autonomously*. To accept this, one need not take a stance on whether *every* justificatory reason must also be an explanatory. An externalist about reasons might as well hold that Jessica can have justificatory reasons she cannot make sense of, but that are nonetheless reasons for her.

of giving equal weight to every individual possessing particular capacities, independently from the relationship and context in which we encounter them.

There is, then, a relevant implication of my argument for moral individualism: its prescriptions may require agents to act in ways that conflict with their autonomy when their self-conception is at odds with that of the impartial agent.

If this conflict does not involve an agent's core self-conception – as in cases that fall under the discrete interpretation of my argument – the resulting friction is likely to be limited and may be conducive to change. Indeed, even though Jessica's autonomy in her interactions with animals is grounded in ordinary conceptions, a discussion with a moral individualist could lead her to view other animals as beings whose individual capacities are a sufficient ground for moral consideration. Her core self-conception as “Jessica the impartial” would allow her to see herself as someone who understands that beneath every ordinary conception lives someone who is, as Regan so aptly put it, a “subject-of-a-life” deserving to be treated with equal respect (Regan 2004).¹⁴ To coherently uphold her impartial self-conception, Jessica would need to figure out whether the ordinary conceptions through which she encounters other animals – and the intertwined self-conceptions she holds – are compatible with seeing those animals as subjects-of-a-life. She would have to reflect on whether these ordinary conceptions – and the respective self-conception – should be reimaged or “shed” (Korsgaard 1996, 102). She would plausibly have to give up the idea of seeing animals as workers or livestock and herself as a farmer. However, she could continue to see them as patients – albeit with a renewed attention to their interests – and might reimagine her relationship with pets as that of a guardian to companions.

If, instead, the contrast with the self-conception required by moral individualism is set against an agent's core self-conception, the friction between moral individualism and an agent's autonomy may result in an unsolvable conflict. Mr. Doom might simply be unable to conceive of himself as someone for whom the life of every e.g., sentient being is of equal worth. Doing so would require him to firstly relinquish his conception of animals as quarry, which would unravel the fabric of the narrative that gives his actions meaning. And secondly, it would require him to adopt a self-conception fundamentally at odds with his understanding of himself: Mr. Doom sees himself not as an impartial agent, but as someone whose ideal is defined by partiality, or, as Bernard Williams puts it, “loyalty,”

¹⁴ Notice that Jessica may have been able to conceive of Roger as sentient even before being persuaded by the moral individualist, and she might have already believed that Roger's sentience gave her a reason not to harm him – for instance, due to her commitment to the *Primum Non Nocere* principle. However, in this case, her reason for not harming Roger, while based on his sentience, was grounded in normative commitments that did not require her to extend the same consideration to the pain of every other sentient being. To become a moral individualist it isn't sufficient to be a kind and caring person, one must also be impartial.

to his kin (Williams 2006)¹⁵ and his community. If Mr. Doom were to shed his identity as a hunter, he would risk becoming someone else.

I use the conditional when discussing the possibility of Mr. Doom conceiving of himself as impartial because there are conflicting views on what constitutes one's core self-conception. Some authors argue that our self-conceptions are ultimately shaped by our psychological dispositions, desires, and life projects, all of which are influenced by the historical contexts in which we grow up (e.g., Williams 1981; Velleman 2009; Frankfurt 2019). Others, like Korsgaard, contend that our core self-conception necessarily requires impartiality (e.g., Korsgaard 1996), and commit us to regard the life of every animal, human or not, as "absolutely good" (Korsgaard 2018, 132-155). From Korsgaard's perspective, Mr. Doom's actions would fail not just to be impartial, but also to be autonomous.

However, if the claim that our core self-conception requires us to be impartial is false (see e.g., Lear 2011, 88-94), cases like Mr. Doom would represent a difficulty for moral individualists. Moral individualist would then have to either concede that people like Mr. Doom are not genuinely obligated to follow their prescriptions or argue that *not all* justificatory reasons require agents to act autonomously¹⁶ on them: that is, they would have to argue that there are some moral reasons that obtain independently of an agent's capacity to understand them as reasons that also explain their actions as their own. In the latter case, Mr. Doom would be expected to treat animals equally, regardless of whether he is able to conceive of himself as someone who endorses the reasons for doing so. This, however, would entail that moral individualism prescribes actions that agent's cannot act upon without becoming someone else.

Regardless of whether *all justificatory reasons* must be construable as explanatory – that is whether all justificatory reasons need also be reasons an agent can act upon autonomously – and whether our core self-conception commits us to impartiality, the main point of my argument still holds: our encounters with animals in our everyday life shape how we understand ourselves, how we make sense of our actions and how we come to ultimately see our actions as our own. Meaning that every change in our ways with dealing with animals will not only require us to act differently but as well to constitute ourselves as a different person.

¹⁵ Notice that this would imply Mr. Doom's autonomy requires him to be *speciesist* in the moral individualist's terms. My argument could even be extended to suggest that xenophobes and racists require discrimination for their own autonomy, though some authors distinguish speciesism from other forms of discrimination (see Williams 2006; Diamond 2018). This is, admittedly, a troubling implication – one that deserves more discussion than I can offer here.

¹⁶ Another option would be that of rejecting a constitutivist conception of autonomy altogether and provide an alternative one.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the people whose insightful and detailed comments helped me significantly improve my initial draft. In alphabetical order: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, Konstantin Deininger, Konstantin Eckl, Herwig Grimm, Russell McIntosh and Jackson Sawatzky. I am also grateful to the Austrian Academy of Sciences for funding my research through a DOC-Fellowship, to the Messerli Research Institute for providing me the necessary funding for proofreading, to Literar-Mechana for funding my research through a doctoral completion grant and to the University of Vienna for funding my research through a doctoral completion grant.

References

- Coghlan, Simon. 2016. "Moral Individualism and Relationalism: A Narrative-Style Philosophical Challenge." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19: 1241–1257.
- Crary, Alice. 2009. *Beyond Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- .2010. "Minding What Already Matters: A Critique of Moral Individualism." *Philosophical Topics* 38 (1): 17–49.
- de Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna, and Peter Singer. 2014. *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diamond, Cora. 1978. "Eating Meat and Eating People." *Philosophy* 53 (206): 465–479.
- .1982. "Anything but Argument?" *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1): 23–41.
- .2018. "Bernard Williams on the Human Prejudice." *Philosophical Investigations* 41, no. 4: 379–398.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. 2019. *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gaita, Raimond. 2004. *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*. London: Routledge.
- Goldie, P. 2004. *On Personality*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kasperbauer, Thomas. J. 2017. *Subhuman: The Moral Psychology of Human Attitudes to Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine. M. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- .2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- .2018. *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- .2022. "Valuing Animals, Nature and Our Own Animal Nature: A Reply to Maclean, Shapiro, and Wallace." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 105: 248–257.

- Lear, Jonathan. 2006. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- .2011. *A Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- May, Todd. 2014. “Moral Individualism, Moral Relationalism, and Obligations to Non-Human Animals.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31 (2): 155–168.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1986 *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, Clare. 2010. *Animal Ethics in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rachels, James. 1990. *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Regan, Tom. 2004. *The Case for Animal Rights*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schapiro, Tamara. 1999. “What Is a Child?” *Ethics* 109 (4): 715–738.
- Singer, Peter. 2011. *Practical Ethics*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- .2023. *Animal Liberation Now*. New York: Random House.
- Taylor, Craig. 2019. “Our Fellow Creatures.” In *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*, edited by O. Kuusela and B. De Mesel, 220–232. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Velleman, J. David. 2004a. “Précis of ‘The Possibility of Practical Reason.’” *Philosophical Studies* 121 (3): 225–238.
- .2004b. “Replies to Discussion on ‘The Possibility of Practical Reason.’” *Philosophical Studies* 121 (3): 277–298.
- .2006. “The Self as Narrator.” In *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, 2nd ed., 170–202. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- .2009. *How We Get Along*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- .2014. *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. “Persons, Character, and Morality.” In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*, 1–19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2006 “The Human Prejudice.” In *B. Williams, Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. A. Moore ed., 135-52. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Article 5: What is it like to See an Animal? Self-Examination and the Moral Relevance of Ordinary Descriptions of Animals

Sub-research question 3: How do ordinary conceptions of animals ground self-examination? And what is its moral potential?

Status: Published in *Philosophical Theorizing and Its Limits: Anti-Theory in Ethics and Philosophy of Science* (edited volume by Springer).

Citation: Linder, E., 2025. “What Is It Like to See an Animal? Self-Examination and the Moral Relevance of Ordinary Descriptions of Animals.” In *Philosophical Theorizing and Its Limits: Anti-Theory in Ethics and Philosophy of Science*, 141–157. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Reproduced with permission from Springer Nature.

Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-82498-2_8.

Abstract: In this chapter, I argue that by eliminating the subjective dimension from moral deliberation, orthodox, theory-oriented approaches to animal ethics overlook the importance of self-examination in navigating the complexity of our moral life. This is accomplished by depicting agents as rational beings, other animals as abstract beings bearing morally relevant properties and moral thinking as limited to rational argumentation. Instead, by following David J. Velleman and authors influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Iris Murdoch, I discuss the importance of the subjective outlook on a moral situation. I argue that ordinary ways in which a subject perceives and describes other animals – for example, as “pets,” “patients,” “fellow creatures,” and so forth – are essential because they mirror how agents think of themselves. For instance, when subjects describe animals as “pets,” they implicitly conceive of themselves as “pet-owners.” I argue that as self-reflecting beings, we can engage in self-examination, which is the process of reflecting and recognising the relationships between how we look at other animals and how we portray ourselves.

Keywords Animal ethics, Self-conception, Iris Murdoch, Cora diamond, David J. Velleman.

Terminology note: In this article, “ordinary descriptions” *replaces* “ordinary conceptions” used throughout the rest of the dissertation. No conceptual distinction is intended.

1 Introduction

In this chapter, I highlight the relevance of the subjective perspective of the moral agent and reflect on the morally relevant ways of engaging with other animals overlooked by orthodox approaches to animal ethics – specifically that of self-examination. A consideration of this dimension of our moral life has been excluded by orthodox, theory-oriented approaches, which typically rely on impoverished descriptions of moral agents and animals and on moral theory to provide us with deontological or utilitarian principles to assess how we should act. By downplaying the subjective dimension of the agent, this approach unduly narrows the array of concepts available to philosophers and thus prevents us from fully appreciating the complexity of our moral life and alternative ways to explore it. In contrast, I develop a critique inspired by Iris Murdoch’s attack on what she called the “behaviouristic” approach to morality (Bagnoli 2011, 202; Murdoch 2013a, 21). This behaviouristic approach limits the exploration of our moral life to what is public and objective and thereby impoverishes the types of ethical concepts at our disposal. Echoing Murdoch’s assertion, it is an approach that has limited the exploration of our moral life to the moment of *choice* and dismissed the importance of *vision* (Murdoch 2013a, 3).

In the first part of the chapter, I present a realistic – though fictional – example to highlight the shortcomings of the orthodox approaches. I then illustrate the pivotal aspects that prevent these approaches from appreciating the full complexity of the situation and the relevance of self-examination; namely (1) the depiction of moral agents and their moral psychology, (2) the depiction of other animals and (3) the kind of moral activities that are taken into consideration.

In the second part of the chapter, I provide an enriched understanding of human–animal interactions, highlighting the role that self-examination may play in navigating morally complicated contexts. Building on the work of authors inspired by Wittgenstein, I focus on the importance of the ordinary ways in which we see and describe animals in our everyday lives. Following David J. Velleman, I highlight the need to consider ourselves as self-reflecting beings and show how parts of our self-conception depend on how we look at and describe animals. Drawing on concepts by Iris Murdoch, I then illustrate how self-examination can take place. I conclude by discussing how my observations should be understood as anti-theoretical.

2 Miguel and Pico

Imagine that Miguel has an old family dog named Pico. Pico is sick, barely walks during the day and suffers from dementia. He wakes everybody up during the night by howling, in what seems like

moments of confusion. Despite Pico's condition, Miguel is unsure whether euthanising Pico is the right decision. Even though Pico's veterinarian seems to think that it is the right time, she does not spend enough time with Pico to witness the moments in which he still seems to enjoy his life. To Miguel, it appears that Pico's life is still worth living as he seems to enjoy his short walks and being cuddled. Miguel has a son who stubbornly maintains that euthanising Pico would be an act of mercy because he thinks that Pico is suffering. However, Miguel is not convinced and asks himself whether he and his son – as well as the rest of the family – are simply motivated to get rid of Pico because he has become a nuisance. After all, taking care of Pico is now a 24-hour job and without him, life would be easier. Miguel cannot determine his real motives and is unable to make sense of whether he simply wants to get rid of a nuisance or whether he wants to help relieve a suffering companion. The only thing Miguel is certain of is that he cannot rely on Pico to explicitly tell him whether he is ready to go.

If we turn to orthodox approaches to animal ethics to grasp the ethical intricacies of this situation, we are bound to be somewhat disappointed. These approaches are historically characterised by an exclusive interest in the animal's capacities and the reasons for action stemming from moral principles determined by rights or utilitarian theories. Both utilitarian and rights theorists tell us that *if* the life of the dog is not worth living *then* we are justified in euthanising him (Regan 2004, 110–113).¹ We have good reasons, according to our best science, to believe that dogs can feel pain. We can assess the welfare of a dog, which can inform us about whether his life is still worth living. If it is not, then euthanising Pico would be justified, either because it is in his best interests (Regan 2004, 110) or because the amount of good in the world would rise (Singer 2011).

However, in some circumstances, like those of Miguel, it is difficult to assess how to apply these principles. It may not be clear because there is no objective way of assessing such a nuanced situation (Broom 1991, 4168)² or – and this is the main theme of this chapter – it may not be clear to someone because their vision is obstructed. This is the case with Miguel, who cannot face the possibility that perhaps it is time to let his companion go. I focus here on this latter case.

Miguel's situation shows that such decisions can be tough, not because it is difficult to understand which moral principles apply but because one is unable to clearly understand how to characterise and make sense of one's own situation. As such, one may not comprehend one's own intentions, what

¹ To give rights theorists their due, when discussing euthanasia, Tom Regan hints at the need to develop a deeper examination of an agent's motives. He argues that euthanasia is legitimate only if the person who kills is motivated out of concern for the animal's interest and welfare.

² The tools to enable an objective assessment are typically construed by welfare scientists. Although there is consensus on the methodologies to assess an animal's welfare, currently there is no unanimous definition of what counts as a "good life" or a "life worth living." Even welfare scientists who claim that animal welfare can be assessed objectively admit that the question of how poor the welfare must be before a life is considered not worth living remains unsettled.

one's motives for acting are and whether it is more appropriate to characterise euthanasia as a case of helping or harming. The disagreement between Miguel and his son may rest on how they view the situation: one sees a poor creature that needs to be put out of its misery and the other sees a vulnerable companion at the mercy of people blinded by their desire for greater tranquillity. This is then reflected in how they come to see themselves: should Miguel end up unnecessarily euthanising Pico, he would condemn himself to becoming someone who has needlessly killed a loved companion. Therefore, there is a connection between how the animal is conceived by Miguel and how he thinks of himself in that situation, which orthodox approaches overlook.

Advocates of orthodox approaches miss these nuances, conceiving morality and moral agents by focusing exclusively on objective and publicly available aspects of our moral life. This is reflected in how they envisage the moral agent, how they depict animals and the kinds of moral thinking they accept. Therefore, to fully appreciate the moral intricacies of Miguel's situation, we require a different conception of these three elements. However, before offering such an alternative, I shall illustrate the pivot points of the orthodoxy.

3 Pivot Points of the Orthodoxy

When using the term "orthodoxy" in animal ethics, I refer to philosophers largely influenced by Peter Singer's "utilitarianism" (2011) and Regan's "rights approach" (2004). Despite the significant differences between these two philosophers, they share a theory-oriented position motivated by the goal of developing an objective and universalisable set of rules that grant animals a moral status and protect them from mistreatment. The focus on objectivity and universalisability is mirrored by a depiction of agents as rational and impartial beings and animals (including humans) as beings with scientifically grounded properties, such as sentience, which are employed to grant them a particular moral status.

3.1 The Rational Agent and Rational Principles

The depiction of an agent as ideally rational is explicit in both Regan's and Singer's writing. For example, Regan's moral agent is a rational individual who chooses the right action based on rational arguments and moral principles and identifies who is worthy of moral considerations through a scientific inquiry into the objective characteristics of potential moral patients (Regan 2004, 121–131). Singer's depiction of an agent is even more explicit. He begins by acknowledging the correctness of the "principle of equal consideration of interests," which states that we ought to "give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions" (Singer, 2011, 20).

He then proceeds to identify, among all those who can be affected by our actions, every being capable of having interests, be they human or non-human. He argues that the principle of equal consideration of interests commits us to an impartial treatment as it “acts like a pair of scales, weighing interests impartially. True scales favour the side where the interest is stronger or where several interests combine to outweigh a smaller number of similar interests, but they take no account of whose interests they are weighing” (Singer 2011, 21). The agent engaging in this weighting is an ideally rational individual whose knowledge of the facts represents the ground upon which normativity is poured. Any personal idiosyncrasies are dismissed as mere background noise that prevents the agent from clearly assessing how things should be.

Ideally, Singer’s agents would deliberate from “the point of view of the universe” (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, 133). Therefore, in line with Henry Sidgwick, Singer depicts the agent as a rationally just and benevolent being who recognises that “the good of one individual is of no more importance than the good of any other” (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, 133) and recognises that “as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally” (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, 133). As Bernard Williams, who opposes this view, puts it:

The model is that I, as theorist, can occupy, if only temporarily and imperfectly, the point of view of the universe, and see everything from the outside, including myself and whatever moral or other dispositions, affections or projects, I may have; and from that outside view, I can assign to them a value. (Williams 1982, 191)

This then leads to the idea that there is “no such thing as a person’s moral being or moral life apart from his development of universal principles and his application of those principles in action and in principled argument” (Diamond 1996, 89). In the quest for impartiality, the subjective dimension is dismissed and relegated to mere “taste,” “feelings” or “opinions” (Regan 2004, 122). Agents who make moral claims are conceived of as reaching objective judgements that tells us little about themselves (Regan 2004, 123). The moral relevance of the subjective dimension is – in this view – merely of interest to empirical psychology that can help provide more “context sensitive theories” (Linder and Grimm 2023; Persson and Shaw 2015). Our psychological dispositions are considered to be facts that prevent us from appropriately instantiating the precepts of moral theories rather than as a source for moral exploration.

This is exemplified by recent attempts to integrate our idiosyncrasies as agents in orthodox accounts through the formulation of hybrid theories. These approaches consider psychological proclivities as limitations to what moral theory can achieve: if there is a deeply rooted tendency to favour some

animals over others despite them being moral equals, moral theory should limit its demands to what is reasonable to expect from normal people. As stated by Fischer et al. (2023), “it’s a virtue of a moral theory that it’s feasible for ordinary human beings to understand and act in accord with that theory” (Fischer et al. 2023, 1106).

In this sense, one’s psychological dispositions are acknowledged as representing an obstacle to the correct implementation of deontological and utilitarian theories. For instance, T. J. Kasperbauer has argued that our disposition towards animals is “naturally” hostile as our evolutionary history is marked by conflict between humans and animals and that we should not be too optimistic in expecting that radically egalitarian theories will be accepted in real-life situations. Because moral theories should be “psychologically plausible,” we are advised to adopt non-ideal theories (Kasperbauer 2017) or hybrid approaches in which some animals suddenly become more equal than others (Fischer, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023; Sebo 2023).

This strategy is also used by moral theorists outside the field of animal ethics; for example, some authors argue that there should be a moral principle establishing a distinction between doing and allowing harm, thus relieving agents of too much negative responsibility (Woollard 2015). As with hybrid theories in animal ethics, the aim is to provide a “non-ideal theory” (Rawls 1971) capable of action guidance while not overburdening agents with responsibilities. Besides the risk of reinforcing the status quo, which is raised by moral theorists themselves (Woollard 2015, 154), this approach treats the subjective dimension as an intractable and irrational tyrant that we had better accommodate, rather than as a source of further moral exploration. By considering the subjective dimension only from a third-person perspective and with an objective eye, we forget that there is an “I” behind that eye, whose gaze is informed and enriched by their personal history and who is a potential point of departure for further moral reflection.

3.2 The Agent Meets the Sentient Being

The primacy of objectivity is also reflected in the way orthodox approaches depict animals, being always abstracted from particular contexts and perspectives. Animals are depicted both as biological/ethological entities – that is, as having nervous systems or as behaving in ways that indicate cognitive abilities – and as beings that have value owing to the capacities they possess (Palmer 2010; Regan 2004; Singer 2011; Višak 2022). In the former case, the depiction is justified as suitably objective by relying on a scientific description that provides us with objective facts about how animals *really* are. In the latter case, the perspective’s legitimacy comes from the particular moral theory adopted – it is legitimate to see animals in a particular way because that is how the moral theory

represents them. Both moral theory and science are considered firm objective grounds upon which rational beings can base their arguments. Moral theory determines the types of normative descriptions of animals that are morally relevant; besides a biological description, an animal is also described as a being that can be valued in so far as it can “feel pain,” “have interest,” have a “good” and so forth.

Singer’s preference-utilitarian³ approach provides us with a perfect example: animals are welcomed to the inner circle of moral consideration *as* sentient beings and therefore *as* beings capable of having interests. Given that the preference-utilitarian approach aims to maximise satisfied preferences, we ought to consider every being whose preference can be satisfied. An animal is first depicted as a being with the appropriate biological and behavioural characteristics that warrant sentience being attributed to it (Singer 2011, 60), and then, because of this sentience, as a receptacle of utility (Singer 2011, 109) as a being that can contain what is valuable – satisfied interests – that can therefore be taken into account in the *utilitarian calculus*. Meanwhile, Regan characterises animals as “subjects-of-a-life,” which are beings with:

...beliefs and desires; perception, memory and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference and welfare interests; a psychophysical unity over time and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them... (Regan 2004, 243)

A subject-of-a-life is both a biological being and one whose value is intrinsic, which runs contrary to Singer’s depiction of animals as utility vessels. The way we know how to treat animals is then given to us by the principle of respect, which applies to these beings because they have “preference autonomy – that is, they can initiate actions with a view to satisfying their preferences” (Palmer 2010, 32). In other words, a subject-of-a-life, as the source of possible ends, is an end in itself and should not be treated as a mere means.

Therefore, both Singer and Regan consider animals as biological beings that acquire moral relevance only in case there is a rational principle that justifies including them in the moral community. This aim of making ethics universal and objective characterises both authors as being within the utilitarian (Sebo 2023; Višak 2022) and rights traditions (Cochrane 2012), as well as Kantian approaches (Korsgaard 2018). As such, these authors exclude the thicker and ordinary ways we use to depict animals in particular contexts from moral analysis. Describing animals in context-dependent ways – for example, as “pets,” “patients” or, as with Miguel, as “a companion” – bears no relevance as these

³ Singer now defends a hedonic utilitarian position.

descriptions depend on contingent cultural practices shaped by anthropocentric prejudices or the irrelevant psychological proclivities of the agent.

4 Beyond Objectivity

The focus of orthodox approaches on objectivity: (1) distorts the subjectivity of agents, who are reduced to rational beings who should ignore their psychological idiosyncrasies, treating them, at best, as obstacles to achieving a pure implementation of moral theory; (2) reduces the possible descriptions of animals to abstract entities whose capacities are determined by science and value is determined by moral theory; and (3) considers that the way to resolve a moral problem is to apply the correct principles to the appropriate situation. The fact that Miguel is conflicted between seeing and describing Pico as a miserable creature who wants to die and a vulnerable dog at his mercy is irrelevant. Pico should be conceived only as a sentient being who may or may not be in pain, and Miguel should adopt a rational attitude and determine the moral principle that should be applied. By placing every mode of moral thinking in a single box made of rules and facts, we risk convincing ourselves that there is only one form of moral thinking, outside which we would be playing the wrong game. We would end up with the conviction that “*this* (whatever it may be) is what moral thinking in essence is; all else is not *really* moral thinking” (Diamond 1997, 228).

Our moral life and its dilemmas are not often like classic theoretical dilemmas in which a rational agent faces two contrasting and irreducible obligations towards entities that bear the property of sentience. Rather, they are difficult challenges through which we try out new concepts, we are confronted with ourselves and interrogate our motives and intentions. As Agam-Segal argues, when we find ourselves in profound disagreements, argumentation usually fails us, and we try to reframe the situation by engaging with it using different concepts (2015, 95). Miguel and his son are engaging with different conceptualisations of Pico, who is much more than simply a sentient being. He is simultaneously a suffering companion, an old, grumpy dog and a patient whose fate depends on the perceptions and judgements of the people around him. These ordinary descriptions of Pico seem to matter. But in what ways do they matter?

Philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein, such as Cora Diamond and Alice Crary, argue that by engaging with these descriptions we employ forms of moral thinking beyond rational argumentation, which enrich our moral imagination (Crary 2016; Diamond 1982). In doing so, we expand the types of moral concepts available to us (Diamond 2001) and gain a more nuanced understanding of a given situation (Crary 2016; Diamond 2008). As Diamond famously argued, the animals we encounter are not “biological concepts” (Diamond 1978, 474) but rather beings embedded in meaningful contexts

and practices. These ways of seeing and conceptualising an animal provide us with an attitude towards and particular ways in which we respond to the animal; for example, pets that cannot be reduced to a mere rational procedure nor an objective gaze. When doing so – for example, by dismissing Miguel’s internal conflict as a mere problem of utility-maximisation or by reducing Pico to a mere sentient being – we are, to borrow Cavell’s expression, deflected, and “[w]e are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity” (Diamond 2008, 57). Diamond’s remark provides a reminder to consider both the existential and the idiosyncratic condition of the subject trapped in the dilemma. She claims that these can be illuminated by engaging with different and more nuanced and practical conceptualisations such as “pet” and “patient” or by recognising both humans and animals as vulnerable beings sharing a life. Rather than seeing animals as “sentient beings,” we may depict them as “fellow creatures” going out into “Time’s enormous Nought” (Diamond 1978, 474).

In general terms, I agree with the Wittgensteinians that these ordinary descriptions provide us with a richer understanding of a situation and the possibility to explore further forms of moral thinking. In particular, I describe the way they enable us to make sense of ourselves and engage in self-examination. In Miguel’s situation, moral argument and empirical analysis have reached their limits. Miguel finds himself in a position where he does not know if euthanising Pico is a way of getting rid of a nuisance or helping an old friend. In this situation, Miguel needs to reflect and examine himself, which he can do by considering how he sees Pico. I now turn to the more constructive part of this chapter and show the ways in which Miguel can do this. I first follow Velleman to highlight the reflective character of the subject and illustrate how one’s self-conception is influenced by the way animals are depicted. I then follow authors inspired by Murdoch to illustrate the way the process of self-examination can take place.

4.1 The “I” Who Sees the Animal

The central point I want to make is that moral agents are specific, rather than generic, people whose perspectives on the world are shaped by their idiosyncrasies and historicity and are reflected in the ways they describe the world and themselves. It is Miguel, rather than Hare’s “Archangel” (Hare 1981, 44), who has to grapple with the decision of whether to euthanise Pico. As Carla Bagnoli (2011) argues in the wake of Murdoch, we need to rethink moral agents in a way that considers their particular and individual dimension. We need to highlight “the significance of *personal vision* and texture of being as something for moral philosophers to consider, as contrasted with ... [an] exclusive focus on *action and choice*” (Diamond 1997, 223). Murdoch claims that a deflationary understanding of action that considers only publicly available aspects is not psychologically realistic (Russell 2024,

6–8). The perspective of the particular subject was excluded by non-cognitivist moral philosophers at Murdoch's time (Bagnoli 2011, 198) and is still excluded by orthodox animal ethicists. As a consequence, animal ethicists – outside Wittgensteinian authors – have dismissed the importance of context-specific descriptions of animals as a source for moral reflection. Miguel's situation cannot be merely described as a relationship between a "*moral agent* as an item on one side, and on the other *a being capable of suffering*" (Diamond 1978, 479, emphasis in the original). It is of no help for Miguel to only focus on and think of Pico as a sentient being whose quality of life can be measured. He also sees a companion in distress. And he sees *his* companion in distress, with Pico as a being towards which *he* has particular responsibilities and whose relationship matters to Miguel and not to someone else. In fact, Miguel is a reflective being. As such, he not only sees the world in a particular way but also sees himself in a particular way. He has a conception of himself which "represents how his various characteristics cohere into a unified personality" (Velleman 2006, 4). Among these characteristics are the fact that Miguel is, among other things, a father and a generous and caring man who enjoys walking with Pico. Moreover, his self-conception depends on the way he understands the world around him. He cannot think of himself as a father if there is no one whom he can describe as his child. When seeing his son as *his* son, Miguel implicitly recognises himself as a father. In the same way, when Miguel sees Pico as *his* companion, he implicitly thinks of himself as a "guardian."⁴

This means that when deciding whether to euthanise Pico, Miguel is not merely listing objective facts that count in favour of the killing of a sentient being – admitting one can do that at all. Rather, he is trying to make sense of his action against the background of his understanding of the context and of himself. As Velleman observes, an action makes sense to an agent "insofar as they contribute to an overall understanding of the action, given how the agent conceives of himself and his situation" (Velleman 2009, 19). If Miguel sees Pico as a relaxed and slightly confused old fellow rather than a poor creature who needs to be put out of his misery, his decision will have a drastic impact on the kind of person he considers himself to be. The words he uses to describe Pico matter because they express Miguel's outlook on the situation and on himself.

To illustrate what I mean, it is helpful to borrow Velleman's metaphor of the agent as an actor.⁵ In *How We Get Along*, Velleman (2009) suggests thinking of agents as actors playing a particular role.⁶ He claims that every action makes sense to the agent because it is the kind of action that the character

⁴ Contemporary animal ethicists prefer the terms "companion/guardian" instead of "pet/pet-owner" as the latter characterise the animal as property.

⁵ Velleman uses male pronouns for the actors in his example, but the claims involved are, of course, gender neutral.

⁶ Velleman develops this metaphor to argue for his constitutivist strategy to ground normativity in what is constitutive of action – namely self-understanding. For the purpose of this chapter, we do not need to accept his whole theory. What matters is that agents sometimes try to make sense of themselves, and this activity is a central activity for our moral life.

that he is playing would do; that is, the kind of action that fits the kind of person the agent is representing both to himself and to others in that situation. What gives reason to the actions of both actors and agents is the character and self-image under which they act; they are both following an ideal of themselves, so to speak. The actor playing Agamemnon will not begin a monologue about his difficult position as the Prince of Denmark, nor will they respond calmly, rather than with outrage, to Achilles during a dispute. There are certain things we expect the actor not to do on pain of shattering the illusion of the play for the audience and themselves. We know that Agamemnon was the commander of the Achaeans, that he had heated fights with Achilles and that his character was that of a proud warrior. Meanwhile, Miguel represents himself as someone who takes great care to help and nurture Pico and would not harm his dog by grounding his deliberation on Pico's euthanasia in selfish considerations. He takes himself to be a loving and trustworthy father and expects to act accordingly. Both actors and agents have a theory of themselves, of who they are and what actions make sense as *their* actions. As Murdoch put it, "Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself, and then comes to resemble the picture" (Murdoch 1997, 75). To this I add that Man is also a creature who describes the world through the picture he has of himself.

In fact, actors do not play their parts alone, nor do they act in a vacuum; they always play their roles in a scenario supported by fellow actors and make use of scenic props. We continually need to make sure that there is agreement with our fellow actors on "scenarios for various kinds of interactions, specifying how those interactions are carried out" (Velleman 2009, 70). As such, scenarios provide a framework and context that gives meaning to the actions. There are scenarios such as "ordering at the restaurant," "going to the toilet" and "going to the doctor," and in each of these scenarios, only a particular set of actions make sense and they make sense only if fellow actors are playing along or if there are the necessary props that enable us to make sense of our actions. I cannot expect to play the scenario "going to the doctor with my car" if there is no one playing the role of the doctor and something to occupy the role of a car. Miguel could not play the role of "father" if his son did not occupy⁷ the role of "son," nor would a guardian be able to play their role if we did not treat and describe animals as "companions." The meaning agents attach to their actions depends on a web of social meanings and practices, which Velleman calls "our way of life" and Wittgenstein would call "our form of life."

The same rationale applies to the more nuanced and evaluative description of one's role in a play. Agamemnon is not just a warrior; he is a "proud" warrior. This is reflected in the ways he describes and deals with his subordinates: not with reverence but with haughtiness and resoluteness. In the same

⁷ I use "occupy" rather than "play" because it is not a necessary condition for other people to "play along with me."

way, an agent does not think of himself as a generic person playing a role in society, but rather employs folk psychological terms to make sense of himself (Velleman 2009, 13) – for instance, by attributing character or personality traits to himself (Goldie 2004). Miguel does not think of himself as a generic guardian but as a “caring” guardian, and this is reflected in how he depicts and treats Pico.

When on stage, actors know their characters and the characters of others and act accordingly. However, if there is a misunderstanding about the scene being played, an actor may break character and disrupt the performance to seek clarification on the scene being enacted. For example, if an actor playing Aegisthus suddenly shouts to Clytemnestra, “You are supposed to stab Agamemnon, not me! I am your lover!” it is clear they have become confused about the scene and their role. Similarly, when discussing whether to euthanise Pico, Miguel and his son are negotiating the scene that will be enacted and the roles that they – and Pico – will play. They cannot understand themselves because they are talking about different scenes. Miguel may be convinced that he is at risk of playing the role of the heartless pet-owner who gets rid of his dog as soon as it has become a nuisance, while his son may fear becoming an overly attached owner who would harm his pet rather than let him go. There is more at stake than a negotiation of principles and discoverable facts. Father and son are inviting each other to look at the kind of person they would become were they to euthanise Pico or not. What is at stake is their understanding and their depiction of themselves, which is expressed through the thicker descriptions they use to describe Pico. In descriptions such as “poor creature” and “confused old fellow,” we find the reflection of Miguel’s identity, which – as I shall discuss in brief – may distort his ways of perceiving Pico as he really is.

Miguel can reflect on himself. He can make explicit – at least to some extent – who he is and recognise how this depends on the way he looks at the world and vice versa. The process of recognising the relationship between how we look at the world and our self-understanding is what I call “self-examination.” In turn, this process can help Miguel to attend to Pico as the being he really is, by understanding which depictions of Pico are false. I shall borrow some ideas from Iris Murdoch to explain this further.

4.2 The Fat and Relentless Ego and Other Animals

To grasp the subjective aspect of our moral life, Iris Murdoch employs the metaphor of “vision.” Murdoch argues that an essential component of our moral life is appreciating the ways we perceive reality and exploring the different conceptualisations we use to depict it. However, these concepts may not be truthful (see e.g., Panizza 2022) as we may be hindered by our “fat relentless ego”

(Murdoch 2013b, 51) from seeing the real face of reality. To counteract his ego and see Pico for what he really is, Miguel should engage with Pico through *attention*, which Murdoch considers a “movement towards moral progress, led by the desire for good, and aiming at reality” (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 158–59), expressed by a just and loving gaze directed upon the reality of others (Murdoch 2013a, 33).

Other authors have already appreciated the relevance of Murdoch’s work to animal ethics (Aaltola 2019; Milligan 2022; Panizza 2022; and more generally Cora Diamond). Their approach has primarily sought to demonstrate that Murdoch’s understanding of attention as a just and loving gaze could enable “an encounter [with other animals] to be value discovering” (Panizza 2022, 35). As such, adopting the language of orthodox approaches, the loving gaze enables us to discover an animal’s moral status. For example, Silvia Caprioglio Panizza argues that such a gaze enables “the encounter with animals as “beings with a life (a formulation reminiscent of Regan’s “subject-of-a-life” but reached quite differently), for whom some things matter and for whom their own life matters in similar ways to how ours matters to us” (Panizza 2022, 35). The recognition of animals as valuable is reached from a situated and subjective perspective rather than from a detached and rational deduction. However, orthodox approaches and those inspired by Murdoch seem to reach quite a similar conclusion: animals matter. The main difference is that within a subject-centred approach, our moral psychology becomes central and this enables us to explore and characterise phenomena such as a change in one’s moral outlook, disagreement and moral progress as processes constituting one’s moral life. These phenomena are not merely presented as psychological facts about us but as concrete conditions in which every agent finds themselves and needs to work their way through. By highlighting that these phenomena constitute the very fabric of a moral problem, Murdoch reminds us that moral thought needs enrichment through further activities and does not proceed merely through syllogisms.

In other words, this also recognises that the agent “can make moral progress, through a modification of consciousness in the direction of justice and realism” (Panizza 2022, 37). The way to achieve such a modification of consciousness is to reflect on the concepts we employ when describing our reality, which depend on how we think of ourselves. Therefore, the way to truthfully recognise an animal’s reality does not stem from an analysis of the consistency of an argument – at least not only from that – but through engagement with the concepts we already use to describe animals and by reflecting on whether these concepts are guided by attention or are hindered by our “ego,” which becomes enamoured with the conceptions we have of ourselves. As such, it is through self-examination – understood as a process that enables us to identify what may hinder us from attending to an animal –

that we can come to see an animal as it really is. As Caprioglio Panizza puts it, “What is required is that we know what interferes with attention, and such interference is related to what we ordinarily call ‘self’” (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 111). Thus, both attention and self-examination should be understood as a movement directed outward toward reality (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 113).

4.3 Seeing Oneself Through the Animal

The ego is understood by Murdoch as a “personal fantasy” or a “tissue of self- aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one” (Murdoch 2013b, 57). Fantasy can show itself in the ways we depict someone and how we describe someone in a particular way; for example, the fact that M in Murdoch’s mother-in-law story describes her daughter- in- law as “brusque and unpolished” (Murdoch 2013a, 16) is a sign of her fantasy that does not allow her to see herself as “prejudiced and narrow minded” (Murdoch 2013a, 17). As soon as she starts to examine herself and accepts that she can be prejudiced and narrow-minded, she can finally see her daughter-in-law more justly, as “gay” and “refreshingly simple” (Murdoch 2013a, 17).

Miguel’s depiction of Pico as a “confused old fellow” is not an isolated conception fallen from the sky. Rather, it is nested within Miguel’s perspective among his doubts and fears. Miguel may find himself forcing such a description on Pico because he does not want to admit that he has to be the one responsible for Pico’s death. As long as Pico is a “confused old fellow,” Miguel is safe from becoming who he cannot bear to be. Instead, admitting that Pico is a poor creature who should be put out of his misery may confront Miguel with the fact that he waited too long and has let his poor dog suffer because of his inability to make a tough decision. This would clash with his self-understanding as a reliable father or virtuous man, and it is through these images of himself that he maintains the affection of his family and respect from his community – or at least this is what he thinks. Alternatively, there may be a subtler motive: Pico may represent *something* for him. Pico may have become a symbol of the time when Miguel’s son was still at home, before leaving the country for work. Letting Pico go would mean, symbolically, letting go of the possibility of again living those nostalgic times. Another alternative is that Miguel does not want to be confronted with a shared mortality and recognise that his body, as well as that of Pico’s, is vulnerable and mortal (see e.g., Crary 2016, 253; Diamond 2008; Panizza 2022). In other words, Miguel may not concede that the stage lights are going to be turned off for both him and Pico.

As hard as it is to realise what is at stake, understanding it can help us to reach some sort of conclusion. Imagine that Miguel, finally, comes to see himself as trapped within a particular image of himself and – as with M in Iris Murdoch’s mother-in-law example – is “an intelligent and well-intentioned

person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to the object that confronts him” (Murdoch 2013a, 17). Self-examination becomes an activity aimed at trying to see oneself under different lights as the subject who is looking at the world from a situated and historical perspective. To borrow again from Velleman’s metaphor, the agent needs to understand what aspect of their character bestows meaning on how they act, describe others and evaluate them.

However, this is no easy business. Someone’s conception of themselves and other animals is far more complex than a first glance may reveal. Pico’s descriptions could be intertwined with multiple threads of Miguel’s self-conception, which is embroidered through a plurality of elements – from his most private motives to historically shaped influences such as social roles, cultural practices and so forth. As Caprioglio Panizza (2022) notes, to appropriately attend to another being, we cannot merely reflect on our “currently ongoing mental states” but should also consider “our history, which may be influencing our current perception, about character traits and past or long-standing attitudes and tendencies” (115). This is particularly evident with animals that have historically been a tame canvas on which we project our societal and egotistical fantasies, be it to eat them, kill them to advertise products or build philosophical systems (Derrida and Wills 2002; Midgley 1983, 79). *A fortiori*, because animals cannot “answer back” (Diamond 2018, 394), they cannot explicitly tell us how they want to be treated, and this makes it terrifyingly easy to ignore their needs and distort our perception of them in our favour. Our fat and relentless ego has a particularly easy time when confronted with animals. When discussing Velleman’s metaphor of agents as actors, I mentioned that animals can figure either as fellow actors or as scenic objects within the enacted scene. Perhaps it is more realistic to recognise that for most of the time, animals are seen as unwilling and powerless props holding together the phantasies we have of ourselves.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the limitations of theory-oriented approaches in animal ethics. I have not attempted to refute them as radically mistaken or out of place. Appreciating the complexity of our moral life does not mean having to dismiss moral theory *tout court* as it can be understood as a way to illuminate aspects and practices of our moral life. For instance, Velleman invites us to look at morality as “distributed holographically through our way of life, in the form of various attitudes and practices that are united only by family resemblances, which show forth only in a particular light” (Velleman 2009, 3). Moral philosophy cannot provide us with a complete “theory of moral reasons, no analysis of moral ‘ought’, no metaphysics of moral facts or properties” (Velleman 2009, 3). Rather, we should think of theories as “idealizations whose value is to highlight the moral family of themes

in our way of life” (Velleman 2009, 164; for a similar approach see also Christensen 2021). In this light, orthodox approaches reveal animals as the kind of beings to which it makes sense to attribute “rights” (Cavalieri 2015; Regan 2004). Through “objective” descriptions of animals, we are provided with the possibility to think of ourselves and animals as equal and as subjects to a universal law, and this sort of consideration enables us to think about animals as having legal rights in the same way that we do.

Moreover, to a certain extent, my remarks are not bereft of theory. After all, by highlighting the importance of subjectivity in our moral life, I have relied on specific conceptions of what an agent is – a self-reflective being with a historically and subjectively laden gaze – and the kind of moral thought we can engage in: self-examination. Therefore, contrary to some anti-theorists, such as D. Z. Phillips, I do not present moral philosophy as “a constant fight against generalizations” (Hämäläinen 2015, 68).

The anti-theoretical spirit of this chapter is reflected in the fact that I do not claim that Velleman and Murdoch provide us with a definitive picture of morality or of the moral agent, nor that self-examination should be understood as an algorithmic process that dissolves every moral problem. As Murdoch noted, we should be wary of falling into the trap of thinking that Miguel’s predicament has an easy fix – for example, through the use of pseudo-psychoanalytic solutions (Murdoch 2013a, 25–28; 2013b, 48). Such an understanding represents the subject as a knowable object about which an ideal observer could collect all relevant data. This would lead to an understanding of self-examination as a perverse psychoanalytic process where “[t]he analyst is pictured as somehow ‘there’ as the ultimate competent observer playing the part of the eye of God” (Murdoch 2013a, 28). However, we are not transparent, either to ourselves or to others, and it would be a mistake to think that self-examination is a movement that can be completed (Chappell 2022, 132). It is a rather difficult imaginative activity through which we confront ourselves with ourselves.

Reflecting on these personal descriptions of animals enables us to cross the borders of the “peculiar institution” (Williams 1985, 193) and explore other aspects of our moral thought. This enables us to appreciate that *sometimes* “moral clarity is achieved via a change in attitude or style of thought – not a change of opinion, but a change of will understood not as a change in desire but as involving a global mental shift, a change in subjectivity” (Agam-Segal 2017, 75).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the people whose insightful and detailed comments helped me significantly improve my initial draft. In alphabetical order: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, Charles Djordjevic, Konstantin Eckl, Herwig Grimm, Nora Hämäläinen, Duncan Richter, and the editors of this volume: Klodian Coko, Uri Leibowitz and Isaac (Yanni) Nevo.

I am also grateful to the Austrian Academy of Sciences for funding my research through a DOC-Fellowship and to the Messerli Research Institute for providing me the necessary funding for proofreading.

References

- Aaltola, Elisa. 2019. "Love and Animals: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Attention as Love." In *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, edited by S. G. Chappell, 193–204. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Agam-Segal, Reshef. 2015. "Aspect-Perception as a Philosophical Method." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 4 (1): 93–121.
- . 2017. "Moral Thought in Wittgenstein: Clarity and Changes of Attitude." In *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought*, edited by R. Agam-Segal and E. Dain, 67–96. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bagnoli, Carla. 2011. "The Exploration of Moral Life." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by J. Broackes, 197–226. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Broom, D. M. 1991. "Animal Welfare: Concepts and Measurements." *Journal of Animal Science* 69 (10): 4167–4175.
- Caprioglio Panizza, Silvia. 2022. *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cavalieri, Paola. 2015. "The Meaning of the Great Ape Project." *Politics and Animals* 1 (1): 16–34.
- Chappell, Sophie Grace. 2022. "Inwardness in Ethics." In *The Murdochian Mind*, edited by S. Caprioglio Panizza and M. Hopwood, 128–141. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Christensen, A. M. S. 2021. *Moral Philosophy and Moral Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cochrane, Alasdair. 2012. *Animal Rights Without Liberation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Crary, Alice. 2016. *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- De Lazari-Radek, K., and P. Singer. 2014. *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Derrida, J., and D. Wills. 2002. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2): 369–418.
- Diamond, C. 1978. "Eating Meat and Eating People." *Philosophy* 53 (206): 465–479.
- . "Anything but Argument?" *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1): 23–41.
- . "'We Are Perpetually Moralists': Iris Murdoch, Facts, and Values." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker, 79–109. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1997. *Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions*. In *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, edited by L. Alanen, S. Heinämaa, and T. Wallgren, 197–234. London: Macmillan Press.
- . 2001. "Injustice and Animals." In *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, edited by C. Elliott, 118–148. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2008. "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy." In *Philosophy and Animal Life*, edited by S. Cavell, C. Diamond, J. McDowell, I. Hacking, and C. Wolfe, 43–89. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2018. "Bernard Williams on the Human Prejudice." *Philosophical Investigations* 41 (4): 379–398.
- Fischer, B., C. Palmer, and T. J. Kasperbauer. 2023. "Hybrid Theories, Psychological Plausibility, and the Human/Animal Divide." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1105–1123.
- Goldie, P. 2004. *On Personality*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hämäläinen, N. 2015. *Literature and Moral Theory*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hare, R. M. 1981. *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kasperbauer, T. J. 2017. *Subhuman: The Moral Psychology of Human Attitudes to Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. 2018. *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Linder, E., and H. Grimm. 2023. "What Is Wrong with Eating Pets? Wittgensteinian Animal Ethics and Its Need for Empirical Data." *Animals* 13 (17): 2747.
- Midgley, M. 1983. *Animals and Why They Matter*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Milligan, T. 2022. "Loving Attention to Animals." In *The Murdochian Mind*, edited by S. G. Chappell, 468–478. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Murdoch, I. 1997. "Metaphysics and Ethics." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by P. J. Conradi. London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press.

- . 2013a. “The Idea of Perfection.” In *The Sovereignty of Good*, edited by I. Murdoch, 1–45. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 2013b. “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’.” In *The Sovereignty of Good*, edited by I. Murdoch, 45–75. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Palmer, C. 2010. *Animal Ethics in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Panizza, S. 2022. “The Animals We Eat: Between Attention and Ironic Detachment.” *Journal of Animal Ethics* 12 (1): 32–50.
- Persson, K., and D. Shaw. 2015. “Empirical Methods in Animal Ethics.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 28: 853–866.
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Regan, T. 2004. *The Case for Animal Rights*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Russell, F. 2024. “Moral Psychology as Soul-Picture.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 0 (0).
- Sebo, J. 2023. “Kantianism for Humans, Utilitarianism for Nonhumans? Yes and No.” *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1211–1230.
- Singer, P. 2011. *Practical Ethics*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Velleman, J. D. 2006. *Self to Self: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2009. *How We Get Along*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Višak, T. 2022. *Capacity for Welfare Across Species*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, B. 1982. *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics*, 183–191. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Woollard, F. 2015. *Doing and Allowing Harm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Article 6: The Hardest Part of the Animal to Swallow Is Their Value

Sub-research question 3: How do ordinary conceptions of animals ground self-examination? And what is its moral potential?

Status: Submitted to *Philosophical Psychology*.

Authorship contribution statement: The original draft was conceptualized and written by the first author. Review and editing were employed by the first and last author. Supervision by the last author. Both authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript. Please refer to the supplementary material for the signed transparency agreement.

Abstract: In this paper, we explore the possibility of interpreting so-called “appeals to naturalness” in animal ethics as rationalisations. These arguments – which attempt to justify the current treatment of animals by pointing to the cruelty and brutality of the natural world and our social and traditional practices – are often criticized and dismissed as merely irrational. Instead, we suggest that they serve a specific psychological function: protecting those who use them from confronting an implicit content. We analyse their function through the psychoanalytic concept of “rationalisation” and identify their implicit content as the difficulty of acknowledging the reality of animal suffering and our responsibility that would come with such an acknowledgment. After examining how this rationalisation occurs and why the notion of “nature” is particularly effective in sustaining it, we argue that understanding appeals to naturalness as rationalisations provide us with an insight into the existential dimension involved in these debates that animal advocates often tend to overlook.

Keywords: Cora Diamond, appeals to naturalness, rationalisation, animal ethics, difficulty of reality.

1 Introduction

“Nature is red in tooth and claw,” “Humans have been eating animals for thousands of years” or “Animals also eat other animals, it’s the circle of life.” These are some variations on a common theme, we will call it “appeal to naturalness,” that accompanies discussions around the moral permissibility of eating meat or harming animals in other socially accepted ways. These are all reasons that those who do not accept extending our moral obligations to animals (henceforth “conservatives¹”) give in favour of preserving the *status quo*: the systematic killing and exploitation of animals for human purposes. As used in these exchanges, the term “naturalness” can be understood in two ways, as referring to those phenomena which are independent from human intervention (the “circle of life”) or to phenomena that are so ingrained in our society and in our ways of doing things, that now are taken as a matter of course (“the ways things have always been done”). They both refer to the idea that from a practical point of view some phenomena, given their pervasiveness, seem inevitable.

A striking aspect of most appeals to naturalness is their apparent weakness in supporting the conclusion they purport to ground i.e., that we are justified to kill and eat animals. In general terms, an appeal to naturalness is always to be regarded with suspicion since it leaves open the question of why we should not improve on our “natural ways” – whatever they actually are (Singer 2011, 61). Moreover, from a logical point of view, these arguments fail as the conclusion “we are justified in eating animals” does not follow from the premise “we have been eating animals for thousands of years” because the term “justified” is present only in the conclusion.

As a response to these arguments, animal advocates both in and outside of academia have been trained to answer conservatives by making explicit the hidden premise – e.g., “whatever is part of our way of life² constitutes *per se* a justification for our actions” – and by pointing out that their interlocutor could not reasonably hold the hidden premise as a moral principle. Adopting it would prevent us from engaging in critical reflection and might lead us to condone all sort of barbaric customs and discriminations that might characterise our and others’ “ways of life.” Since no reasonable person would accept that *every* aspect of our way of life is justified, the animal’s advocate ends up swiftly dismissing the argument by charging the interlocutor of incoherence. This leaves us to dismiss the unpersuaded conservative either as irrational or as weak-willed (e.g., Aaltola 2019). We think that

¹ We are not using the term conservative in its orthodox political sense, but rather only to denote those people that prefer to maintain the *status quo* rather than pursuing socio-cultural change.

² We acknowledge that the expression “way of life” is vague and that it is not clear who the determiner “our” refers to. We are referring here to what a vague idea of culture that conservative interlocutors sometimes have in mind. Or rather to the norms that the conservative perceives as constituting “our” culture.

such a quick dismissal overlooks a possible psychological function of the conservative's arguments and by doing so misses the important existential consequences of what would happen if we welcomed animals in our moral community.

In this paper, we share Cora Diamond's and Iris Murdoch's suspicion that flawed arguments which derive normative statements from claims about how things already are, not only show logical inconsistencies, but are also, and more importantly, the symptom of someone struggling with a morally demanding situation: by hiding one's premise one is avoiding looking at the situation in its entirety and thereby avoiding taking responsibility (Murdoch 1956; Diamond 1996). As Diamond writes, "we may use arguments of this type when we justify to ourselves things which we want to do but which we cannot clearly square with conscience. (...) What is going on in such cases may be a kind of evasion, a kind of refusal to take responsibility" (Diamond 1996, 80-81). In such cases, the interlocutor should not be understood as interested in developing an argument aimed at demonstrating some moral truth, but rather as someone trying not to confront something they cannot bear; something the truth of which they have already conceded, yet they still attempt to avoid in order not to engage with its implications.

We suggest that interpreting the conservative's argument along these lines can lead us to appreciate a deeper problem that a mere logical analysis makes us overlook. Hence, in the following pages we explore what we can learn by not taking the conservative at face value and instead analysing their arguments as playing the psychological function of protecting them from an issue that they already implicitly concede being real and of moral relevance: animal suffering caused by humans. This means that we will analyse the argument both in terms of its *function* and its *implicit content*. The former will shed light on what the conservative is actually doing when stating their argument: rather than trying to get at the bottom of a moral problem, they might be trying to escape the depths of it. In fact, their argument refers to an *implicit content* – something the conservative does not want to face. In our case it is animal suffering, our responsibility for it and the existential consequences that come with such acknowledgment.

The plausibility of this interpretation is supported by evidence that the conservative already agrees that animals matter, i.e. that they can be harmed or wronged in a morally relevant sense. Indeed, the very fact that their claims never put into doubt the animals' value, but rather try to find reasons why we shouldn't take it into account shows that they accept their value but refrain from taking it seriously (more on this below).

In the first part of the paper, we will show how, given their function, the conservative arguments can be categorised as rationalisations. That is, as reasons given to avoid the consequences of acknowledging a specific state of affair: the animals' plight and our involvement in it. This means that we will understand the conservative as a psychologically complex subject moved by emotions and desires rather than as a mere rational agent. In the second part of the paper, we develop an analysis of the implicit content of these rationalisations. We define this implicit content through Cora Diamond's notion of "difficulty of reality" (Diamond 2003, 2) and argue that the conservative might be motivated by a genuine existential concern. It is an existential concern in the sense that acknowledging the moral relevance of animal suffering comes with a radical shift in one's understanding of oneself and the world.

Reframing the conservative's stance as a rationalisation rather than as an actual argument presents both a benefit and a drawback. The benefit is that it allows us to understand what the conservatives are doing with their words and meet them on the same ground: not that of a dialectical quarrel but rather that of an exploration of our condition as moral beings. The strategy employed in this paper follows, then, a principle of charity, in line with the maxim that one should not "make arguments out of non-arguments" (e.g., Thomas 1973; Goddu 2025).³ Moreover, as we will show, it enables us to identify and fully appreciate the difficulty of reality that animal advocates do not typically make explicit. In other words, it enables us to articulate the hidden existential dimension embedded in the difficult knowledge imposed on all of us by the plight of animals and implicitly invoked by the conservative.

By providing a psychological analysis of the conservative we are entering troubled waters, however. This approach seems dubious on methodological grounds. Indeed, one might object that we can never know with certainty someone else's motives. So, accusing someone of rationalising would only provide the animal advocate with a weak argument and the risk of being accused of patronising the interlocutor by treating them as a psychological patient rather than an autonomous agent. We need, then, to establish a way to distinguish merely bad arguments from rationalisations.

Before showing how this can be done, we must stress the modesty of our claim: We are not establishing a necessary link between bad argumentation and rationalisations. Nor are we suggesting that we should treat conservative's arguments as rationalisations by default. We are rather providing

³ As Goddu observes, instances in which a non-argument is presented as an argument should be characterised as infringing the principle of accuracy rather than the principle of charity (Goddu 2025). The former concerns representing what is actually argued by the interlocutor, whereas the latter requires addressing a deficit in the interlocutor's argument and providing the best interpretation of it. In this paper, we aim to discuss and reconstruct the conservative's appeal to naturalness, attributing to it an underlying motivation that may not be explicitly stated. This interpretive move is closer to the principle of charity than to the principle of accuracy.

a charitable way to interpret *some* arguments which have already failed the test of rational argumentation. In what follows, we will establish a conceptual distinction between rationalisation and flawed argumentation, as we will show the distinction lies in the *function* that rationalisation plays and in the motivations of the rationalising agent. Moreover, even though we cannot provide a foolproof method to identify them in practice, we will highlight indicators that suggest when a conservative is resorting to rationalisation.

2 A reason's function: rationalising

We have suggested understanding the reasons given by the conservative as instances of *rationalisation*. The first question to address before proceeding is to clarify how to distinguish between these instances and bad arguments. To address it we will first draw the distinction conceptually and then show how to identify signs of rationalisation in real cases.

2.1 Conceptual distinction between rationalisation and merely bad argumentation

For the conceptual distinction: the difference between a rationalisation and a merely bad argument lies in the fact that the former is an instance of self-deception, whereas the latter is merely characterised by logical and epistemic flaws. It is a specific form of irrationality in which a psychological state – in this case, the belief about the moral significance of the natural course of the world – is promoted in order to block the formation of another belief (Gardner 1993, 18), namely the belief in the existence of a moral problem constituted by the reality of animal suffering (which is what we have termed the “implicit content”). The fact that the former blocks, or as Sebastian Gardner puts it “buries” (Ivi, 21), the latter is enabled by the fact that the two psychological states are in contradiction with each other.

The relation between these two beliefs is an *instrumental relation* where the former prevents the formation of the latter in response to the subject's *motivations* (Gardner 1993, 18; Mele 2001, 96).⁴ The motivation might be, for example, that holding a given belief would be unacceptable, emotionally difficult, or would expose the subject to consequences they prefer to avoid. In the case of poor argumentation, by contrast, no such motivation is present: the person is motivated to establish the truth but lacks the capacity to do so, for instance because of inadequate understanding of the matter at hand.⁵

⁴ As Gardner notices, instances of self-deception are not conscious nor is there an intentional effort from the subject to deceive themselves (1993).

⁵ Or insufficiently motivated to reach its truth, in case of cases of bad-argumentation explained by akrasia.

In our case, the appeal to naturalness would count as merely poor argumentation only if it were not functioning to bury an unacceptable belief. In other words, only if there wasn't an implicit content that motivates the agent into employing the promoted belief as a reason to bury it. The instrumental relation between these two psychological states is precisely what characterises rationalisation: the function of the former – the appeal to naturalness – is to bury the latter – the recognition of the moral significance of animal suffering – and thereby prevent it from being endorsed.

In psychoanalytical terms the function of rationalisation is that of providing a defence mechanism for the subject (McWilliams 2011, 128-129). Indeed, psychoanalysis provides us with the rationale for the argument and allows us to further explore what the defence mechanisms protect us from – such as overwhelming morally related emotions like shame (McWilliams 2011, 100) and/or the threat to maintaining “a strong, consistent, positively valued sense of self” (McWilliams 2011, 101). Contemporary psychoanalysis defines rationalisations⁶ as a

defense mechanism which permits an individual to deal with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by devising reassuring or self-serving but incorrect explanations for his or her own or others' thoughts, actions, or feelings, which cover up other motives (Knoll, Starrs, and Perry 2020, 4301; see also Perry 1990).

The function of rationalisation is then that of a defence mechanism, which is instantiated by employing “incorrect explanations” – the fact that appealing to naturalness would solve the moral problem stemming from animal suffering – in order to deal with a “stressor” – the consequences that come from the recognition of the moral problem.

2.2 Signs of rationalisation

These considerations allowed us to trace a conceptual distinction between bad arguments and rationalisation, but do not help us to tell whether the conservative in front of us is rationalising. For this purpose, John Christopher Perry has developed a “defense mechanism rating scale” (Perry 1990; Lingiardi and Madeddu 1994) which allows psychotherapists to identify signs that indicate that the interlocutor is rationalising. Among them are:

- a) Incoherence (Lingiardi and Madeddu 1994, 414)
- b) Avoidance of responsibility (Lingiardi and Madeddu 1994, 414)

⁶ There are other approaches to psychology that make use of this term to designate more or less the same phenomenon. Leon Festinger (1978), for example, makes use of it in his theory of cognitive dissonance. We choose a psychoanalytic approach mainly because we did not focus on the social aspect but rather on the existential aspect of the situation. And because clinical psychoanalysis has developed a helpful list of criteria to identify instances of rationalisation.

- c) Avoidance of the object of distress (Lingiardi and Madeddu 1994, 414)
- d) Framing the moral wrongdoing as necessary (Lingiardi and Madeddu 1994, 414)
- e) Hiding their true motivations (Lingiardi and Madeddu 1994, 414)

Moreover, we would add a further sign to Perry's scale:

- f) Being selectively incoherent when addressing a particular topic.

The last element (f) refers to situations in which we encounter an interlocutor who is skilled in philosophical dialogue and adheres to a precise and coherent line of reasoning when discussing other topics, yet falters when confronted with the ethical issue regarding our treatment of the other animals. The fact that the interlocutor does not stumble elsewhere suggests that the weakness of their arguments here is likely to lie elsewhere.

Perry's scale, with our addition, provides us with elements that, if present, should raise suspicion that the function of the argument from "naturalness" is not to explore what is true or right, but something else. In this case, we suggest, the function is to protect the subject from the responsibility they are trying to avoid.

To illustrate this, let us consider a case in which an argument from "naturalness" appears to function as a rationalisation rather than a genuine argument. Let us take as an example of rationalisation the arguments of a debate uploaded on YouTube between two college students and a popular vegan activist, Ed "Earthling" Winters (Earthling Ed 2024). The debate begins with the question, "Why aren't you vegan yet?" through which Winters engages his interlocutors, urging them to find moral justification for their choices. His questions aim to draw attention to animal suffering caused by the meat industry and show that any justification one might come up with in support of the practice of eating animals can be easily dismissed. Moreover, he is explicitly interested in framing the problem as a problem that his interlocutors face as responsible agents. Winter asks them why *they* are not vegan. In other words, he is urging his interlocutors to assume the practical standpoint of the autonomous agent who has to evaluate the reasons in favour or against their actions and ask themselves whether they have reasons to become vegan. He is neither interested to know the reason why everybody isn't vegan nor is he asking whether it would be reasonable to demand that every human being should go vegan.

Despite the framing of the problem, one of the students quickly shifts the focus of the conversation to the fact that "we," privileged Western people, are able to make that decision because we are indeed privileged, whereas people in the "eastern side of the world" who "rely on substantial farming" could not afford that (Earthling Ed 2024, 4:26). In doing so, the student is implying that the fact that someone else cannot go vegan somehow justifies himself in not being vegan. His responsibility is

diluted by diverting our attention to other agents who could not possibly assume that responsibility. And since they cannot assume it, the students too should not be held responsible.

Winter notices the evasion of responsibility and urges them to go back to his original question clarifying that he is interested in knowing why they, being indeed privileged, don't stop eating animal products. After a brief back and forth the students strike out again with appeals to naturalness. They first start by insisting that it would be difficult to convince people from "developing countries" (Earthling Ed 2024, 11:20) to go vegan and then double down by saying that after all "animals kill each other too" (Earthling Ed 2024, 12:56).

In this case, it is plausible to characterise the arguments given by the students as rationalisations. In fact, the concept of rationalisation seems applicable because it is reasonable to assume that the students are motivated to appeal to naturalness to suppress recognition of the moral problem posed by animal suffering and thus avoid taking responsibility for it. Moreover, the student's behaviour corresponds with Perry's indicators: they first and foremost end up avoiding taking responsibility (b). Indeed, the reasons they present end up supporting their avoidance of the responsibility for the harm done to animals. Moreover, their arguments rely on hidden premises that lead them, if accepted, to incoherent positions (a). The implicit assumptions – "we are justified in acting as other animals do" and "we are not obliged to do what is good if the rest of the world does not" – would lead to unacceptable conclusions, such as "women are entitled to rip off the heads of their mates post-coitus, since praying mantises do that as well" or "we should be allowed to kill other people because other people do so."

Another crucial element that emerges throughout the debate is the (quite warranted) belief that becoming vegan would not eliminate animal suffering completely. Both students claim that if they were to become vegan the exploitation and the killing of billions of animals every year would not stop. This belief goes hand in hand with the appeal to naturalness: the systemic killing of animals is so deeply engrained in contemporary developed human life that it can be perceived as a constitutive, almost necessary (see point d), element of society that an individual alone, or even a group of people cannot hope to fix. Those who become vegan might cause the sparing of a few animals' lives, but they cannot realistically expect to change the world by changing their diet. Nonetheless, even if it were true that veganism is not particularly effective to eliminate human-induced animal suffering,⁷ it does not mean we are absolved. Not even consequentialist approaches would condone such a refusal to take responsibility, as it is quite plausible that going vegan would still bring about at least *some*

⁷ For example, one could argue that, to achieve a significant reduction in the demand for meat products and consequently reduce supply, the vegan movement would need much greater participation.

better consequences, either by improving the lives of animals or by reducing the production of more sentient beings.⁸

Even if there is no escape from our moral responsibility an important aspect of the matter remains: once we recognise our involvement in the exploitation and the killing of other animals we also face the naturalness through which this occurs and we risk finding ourselves alienated from the rest of society.

We think that this latter element shows an important aspect that the conservatives are implicitly referring to. Indeed, if we look at the conservative as a psychological subject rather than merely as an autonomous being we can see how their appeal to naturalness actually hints toward a difficulty the conservative is trying to avoid confronting. That is, it hints towards the implicit content of their argument: the pervasive horror of animal suffering, our responsibility for it, and our tacit agreement to it.

According to the definition of “rationalisation,” the conservative’s argument must be an incorrect explanation for the conservative’s thoughts or actions, and it must be about something for which the conservative ought – or holds that they ought – to take responsibility. In our case, the conservative refusal to take responsibility cannot be explained in terms of them thinking to be justified by their argument, but in terms of a desire to avoid the implicit content. In other terms, when rationalising, the conservative does not avoid their responsibility because they have been rationally persuaded that the matter at hand does not concern them, but rather because they do not want to confront themselves with it. Rationalisation protects us from the implicit content. In the appeal to naturalness, the implicit content is both the condition in which most animals live in contemporary society, and the serious recognition of an animal’s moral worth, including the overwhelming sense of responsibility that acknowledging such state of affairs would engender.

Before we discuss more precisely what we mean with “implicit content” we want to briefly answer some objections that one might raise. An animal advocate might claim that the conservative is only motivated to rationalise by egoistic drives, such as the pleasure of eating meat or wearing leather shoes. This can’t be the whole story. As it does not explain why some conservatives engage in the discussion and try to give reasons to justify their moral integrity. Forasmuch as they engage in moral discourse, they implicitly admit to valuing the practice of giving reasons and being considered a person with moral integrity. If they did not, they could just avoid the effort of engaging in the debate

⁸ This point needs empirical support. If the data would prove us wrong than our point would only work for those that are not strictly committed to consequentialism.

in the first place.⁹ Indeed, the very idea of rationalisation seems to suggest that they are trying to engage in a moral discussion (even though they do not fully commit to it). According to the abovementioned definition, rationalisations are meant to appear as those reasons that one gives in order to establish some moral truth. That is, a rationalisation must have the same apparent function of full-fledged reason: that of evaluating the rightness of an action. When trying to evaluate the moral rightness of an action, an autonomous agent tries to truthfully establish whether they are responsible or not to act in some way. They are trying to figure out what's the right thing to do. On the contrary, when rationalising, a person already recognises, more or less consciously, that they should, to some extent be held responsible, but tries to slip away from it.

To that one might say "All right, but how do we know that the conservative isn't just motivated to avoid being blamed for something he does not think is of moral relevance? How do we know that they really hold that what we do to animal is of moral relevance?"

As we already mentioned in the beginning, some conservatives recognise, at least implicitly, that animals have moral worth and what we do to them should be avoided. This is suggested by three elements in the conservative's answer: 1) they shift the focus of the conversations to other matters and by doing so not only 2) do they not dispute that animals have a moral worth,¹⁰ but they even recognise it 3) by trying to find a reason for why they are warranted to not take it seriously. These arguments shift the focus away from the subject matter and distract us from it. They seem to have the form of "yes but..." where the "yes" functions as a nod that recognises an animal's moral worth but is quickly distracted with some conjuring trick following the "but."

In the meantime, animals are kept in the background. Their suffering is uncanny and disturbing and remains hidden in the conversation. The recognition of their condition, and our responsibility for their plight is the implicit content that the argument of the sceptic is about.

3 Difficulties of reality: the naturalness of suffering

So far we have shown that some arguments given by conservatives could be understood as having the function of protecting them from something they cannot accept, what we called the "implicit content." This implicit content is the reality of animal suffering and our responsibility for it. In particular, it is the way in which our harming of animals has been normalised, to the extent that its pervasiveness is

⁹ It is possible that some just do not care and are in for it just to make fun of their interlocutors; then, the considerations of this paper do not apply to these people.

¹⁰ Some do but most do not really mean it. And those who do mean it just fall out of the set of people for whom these considerations are relevant.

accepted as a matter of course. Our lives are played out on the background of a normalised relentless production, exploitation, and killing of sentient beings.

Indeed, the sheer numbers of animals killed, for food production alone, is staggering: 316,000 slaughtered animals every two minutes (Singer 2023, 99). Moreover, the living conditions of those who haven't been killed yet are notoriously miserable. Not only are animals cramped in small spaces, but their bodies are also mutilated to avoid them harming each other. Just to give some examples: calves are dehorned (Stafford and Mellor 2005), piglet's tails are docked without anaesthesia to prevent them to engage in tail biting,¹¹ and broiler chicken's beaks are trimmed (Glatz and Underwood 2020). Besides their role in the food industry, animals are used in other contexts – as research tools, as pieces of clothing, for entertainment, etc. Their use massively shapes and sustains our society. In fact, it is almost impossible to spend a regular day without encountering something that has been produced through the exploitation and suffering of other animals. One does not need to *know* the data and the statistics of the number of animals killed every day for our pleasure and comfort to witness the pervasiveness of the exploitation. Our everyday life is populated by the ghosts of dead animals: from the meat and dairy section in supermarkets to the leather shoes, belts and jackets that ordinary people wear every day.

The suffering that animals undergo are in these cases caused directly by humans, by our fellow humans. Facing such a reality forces us to come to terms with a moral and existential difficulty: on the one hand we tend to consider ourselves and our fellow humans as decent people and on the other we are all participating in a horrific endeavour. When one acknowledges the value that animals have, the difficulty appears. Their world shifts and the meaning that everyday activities have, once normal and ordinary, shows its horrific aspect, yet still ordinary and thereby even more horrific. Some vegans, for example, cannot see pieces of meat as food anymore but only as corpses (Panizza 2020). In *Consider the Lobster*, David Foster Wallace portrays this experience by recounting his visit at the Maine Lobster Festival (MLF), writing “The truth is that if you, the festival attendee, *permit* [emphasis added] yourself to think that lobsters can suffer and would rather not, MLF begins to take on the aspect of something like a Roman circus or medieval torture-fest” (Wallace 2007, 253).

Cora Diamond has called these sorts of conditions “difficulties of reality” and defined them as

experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its explicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its explicability. We take things so. And the things we take so may simply not, to others,

¹¹ Even though tail docking is illegal in the EU this practice is nonetheless widespread (Ferrara and Nelson 2019).

present the kind of difficulty – of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one’s mind round (Diamond 2003, 2-3).

As an instance of such difficulties Diamond discusses precisely the “difficulty of human life in its relation to that of animals, of the horror of what we do, and the horror of our blotting it out of consciousness” (Diamond 2003, 2-3). Here with “blotting it out of consciousness” she refers to the fact that people do not recognise to be engaging in a sort of disavowal. To illustrate what she means, Diamond discusses Elisabeth Costello a character of Coetzee’s Tannen Lectures published under the title *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee 2016) as a novella. Costello is a novelist “haunted by the horrors of what we do to animals” (Diamond 2003, 3) and cannot come to terms with the casualness and the coolness with which normal people live with the relentless killing of animals:

Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money (...) Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you? (Coetzee 2016, 69).

The difficulty of reality linked to the suffering of animals is, then, the experience in which we witness something daunting and astonishing, what we do to animals, *and* do so in the midst of a normalisation of that suffering. As Costello says – “everyone can come to terms with it,” and at the same time the person confronted with such difficulty struggles to get their “head around it.” This is an experience that, we are arguing, moves both the animal’s advocate (explicitly) and the conservative (implicitly) and underlies the efforts of both – to alleviate it or deny it. It is an existential dimension that both have to deal with but which they come to deal with in different ways. And somehow the way in which the conservative deals with it is quite effective. But why?

4 The good, the necessary, and the natural

We have argued that the function of the appeal to naturalness can plausibly be identified as avoiding an implicit content, which we have characterized as the difficulty of reality presented by the overwhelming and relentless suffering and exploitation of animals and our causal role, as humans, in it. But why is the appeal to naturalness so effective in misdirecting the conservative’s attention from the difficulties of animal suffering? Indeed, for a rationalisation to work it has to make (at least initial) sense to the interlocutor and the conservative themselves. Rationalisations need to have the form of full-fledged moral reasons; they are reasons in disguise and the disguise must be plausible. So, what is it about the appeal to naturalness that allows it to pass as a full-fledged moral reason?

The answer to this lies in the idea of “nature” which has, historically, played a prominent though controversial role in ethical debates. In very general terms the idea is that it is at least unwise to try to change something which is natural and therefore subjected to the immutable laws of nature. However, what is exactly meant by “natural” and “unwise” changes depending on the debate in which these terms are used.

Besides the many meanings of “nature,” there are two broad ways of understanding “natural” in a normative way, which is relevant to our discussion. The first is the idea that whatever is natural is good, where natural is understood as untouched by human intervention. The second is the idea that what is natural cannot be otherwise, and this means that any discussion of our responsibility regarding natural matters is moot. In the first sense the concept is employed, for example, in bioethical debates in situations in which human intervention would modify the “natural process” of things. For instance, by using CRISPR technology to modify the genes of an organism for human purposes (e.g., Ferrari 2024; Winter 2024, 1-2). The underlying idea is usually that the way in which nature is structured, or designed, is good and that a human intervention might lead us to disastrous and unexpected consequences.

Besides the vagueness in how far this concept can actually be applied, there are two issues with this conception. The first is that it relies on a teleological understanding of nature that clashes with our contemporary scientific understanding of natural selection (Rachels 1990, 115-116; Pollo 2008). We do not believe anymore that animals are created for their own good and just need to find their place in the natural order of things, but rather that natural selection brings about beings which might find themselves in favourable conditions that allow them to perpetuate their genes. If the conditions are too harsh the being suffers and dies. Hence, the laws of nature are not an appropriate source of inspiration to determine what is good. The second issue follows from this last observation: nature is indeed red in tooth and claw. This idea is substantiated by gruesome anecdotes and ethological reports of what animals do to each other (e.g., cannibalism among tiger sharks in the womb (Chapman et al. 2013), infanticide among lions (Packer and Pusey 1984), hoarding of preys through paralysis by shrews (Kowalski and Rychlik 2018), disembowelments by hyenas (Smith and Holekamp 2023)). These are natural facts that characterize the natural course of things: should we then say that these are all “good” things?

The second meaning of the term “natural” picks up precisely on this conception of nature and on the idea that suffering is a necessary feature of the natural world. It refers to the idea that some things are regulated by the laws of nature and there is little humans can do to change nature’s course (cf. McMahan 2010; Korsgaard 2018, 174-175). The fact that our human ways of life heavily rely on the

killing and slaughtering of animals is, on this view, but a symptom that these atrocities are part of the natural and immutable order of things.

In this case, the argument is not that nature can guide us to understand what is good but rather that life cannot but be suffering, and trying to change it is idealistic and futile. There are two obvious objections to this claim. Firstly, even if there always will be animal suffering this does not mean that we shouldn't try to minimize it. If things are bad, why should we actively participate in making them worse? If we broke our foot, would we break the other one because we are already in pain? Secondly, it is plainly false that what is done to animals is dictated by irresistible laws of nature, insofar as there are people who do not engage in the exploitation and killing of animals. Or at least they do not participate to the same extent. Since these people are also subject to the laws of nature it is clear that it is not these alleged laws that determine their actions.

This last meaning of "natural" appeals to a sense of necessity dictated by the laws of nature: nature is cruel and since we are part of it, we cannot but be cruel. It is made clear that it is unreasonable to want things to be otherwise. Nature becomes an inevitable force that we have to yield to, and even though there are clear objections to such a use of nature in ethical argumentation, the argument is nonetheless rhetorically persuasive because of the way in which claiming that something is natural confers to it a sense of necessity.

4.1 Nature and the difficulties of reality

It is this sense of necessity, which understands animal suffering as necessarily determined by the laws of nature, that allows the conservative's rationalisations to work so effectively. It does so for two main reasons. First and foremost, it depicts something contingent yet has the appearance of something immutable into something necessary. The appeal to naturalness turns the normality with which horror and routine cohabit into something that cannot be otherwise. The fact that we, our friends, family and colleagues – the people with which we break bread – participate in a systematic evil becomes part of the natural order of things. What has become a social norm is depicted – more or less explicitly – by the conservative as the instantiation of the natural law. The social norms regulating the practices of raising, exploiting and killing animals are depicted as natural events determined by the immutable laws of nature. And if something is indeed natural and cannot be changed why should we concern ourselves with trying to fix it? Doing so is at best a sign of weak sentimentality. Elizabeth Costello, for example, can be seen under two different lights depending on whether we buy into the idea that what we do to animals is "natural": if we do not, we see a woman struggling with avoidable horrors, alienated by her fellow humans with whom she does not seem to be able to communicate anymore.

Her character is like that of Cassandra who instead of warning us of an inevitable future is trying to make us look at an unbearable present. In this sense she is a heroic character dealing with a difficulty of reality. If instead we agree that this is just how things are, that killing animals is a human behaviour determined by natural laws and therefore should not be something that we should be concerned about, she appears like a pathetic woman, obsessed with impractical sentimentalities and unable to face the tough reality. Indeed, if we were to accept animal suffering as dictated by the laws of nature, the perspective would shift: those urging us to confront it would appear as if they were the ones unable to cope with the difficulty of reality.

The appeal to naturalness then allows for a great trick: it first turns what is a contingent aspect of our society into a natural necessity. It allows the conservative to depict something that is a mere contingent aspect of nature as something constitutive of it that neither can nor should be changed. This is justified because of the pervasiveness of the effects of what we do to other animals. It is fairly easy to confuse what we have witnessed our whole life with what cannot but be so. We take things so because that is how we have always seen them. If something is pervasive it has to be somehow part of the texture of history. Once we have accepted this, the appeal to naturalness suggests that what cannot be changed and what is natural should not be something we should be concerned with and makes the animal advocate look like the person unable to deal with the “tough and hard facts.”

Of course, as things currently stand, social, political, and economic structures work to reinforce the conservative’s belief that nothing can change. In pragmatic terms, then, the conservative’s sense of hopelessness might seem justified. Nonetheless, however deeply rooted the structures supporting the system of animal exploitation may be, that does not justify the conservative neither to claim that change is impossible nor that our role ought to be relegated to that of witnesses of the natural order (whatever that is) disclosing itself.

5 Conclusions: Coming to terms with the difficulties of reality

By portraying the harm we inflict on animals as necessary and natural, the burden of responsibility is shifted onto nature. This allows the conservative to avoid confronting the reality that they, and almost every other human being, are participating in an immoral endeavour. Nonetheless, the reason given by the conservative to justify that shift of responsibility ought to be rejected: the reasons they give are not reasons whose function is to establish a moral truth but is rather to rationalise and find an excuse for not confronting themselves with a difficulty of reality.

Our analysis of the difficulties of reality allowed us to dive deeper in the existential implications of accepting our responsibility toward other animals. It enabled us to see what is truly at stake: a shift

in the conservative's understanding of themselves and the society they inhabit. This, in turn, gives us reason not to dismiss conservative arguments as easily as animal advocates tend to do. Indeed, while we might still describe the conservative as “irrational” or “weak-willed,” such judgments now seem reductive.

Elisa Aaltola, for example, has suggested employing the notion of *akrasia* (weakness of the will) to make sense of why omnivores can't give up their regular diet and continue eating animals despite their knowledge of what happens to them (Aaltola 2019). In doing so, she depicts the weak-willed agent as someone who lacks self-control (Aaltola 2019, 6) and is driven by “his desires for pleasure, or his emotions” (Aaltola 2019, 6). If we were to follow Aaltola's interpretation, we would depict the conservative as someone driven by a desire to avoid the difficulties of reality, as if this desire were an impersonal psychological force. However, as we have shown, the difficulty of this choice does not consist merely in a battle of the will against one's corrupted passions. Instead, we suggest that this “force” bears an existential meaning, as it stems from the conservative's need to preserve a particular understanding of themselves and their world. It arises from the need to keep things in place and avoid confronting the profound anguish of seeing their world shift into a nightmare.

This does not mean that the conservative is in any way justified in holding their position. The fact that their motivations have taken on an existential connotation does not, in itself, give us any further reason to let the conservative off the hook. In fact, we have admitted from the beginning that we should treat the conservative not only as a psychological subject but also as an autonomous agent. We never claimed that they should be reduced to a mere psychological subject. Indeed, the fact that we can provide an explanation for their behaviour does not, by any means, justify it. The conservative's occasional failure to take responsibility does not mean they are incapable of acting as autonomous agents, nor does it mean we should stop holding them to such standards. Rather, it shows that the road to autonomy is far more difficult and requires to challenge and reframe not only one's understanding of oneself but also of the society in which one finds oneself.

Indeed, as we've discussed, confronting the difficulties of reality means recognizing the everyday actions of those around us – such as eating a steak, taking children to the zoo, or buying a new leather coat – as a disturbing symptom of a systemic exploitation of sentient beings. It involves seeing problems and suffering where everything once seemed simple, smooth and normal. This also creates an uncomfortable attitude toward – and conflict with – those around us. This realization brings a sense of unease and anxiety, as we come to understand that we and our fellow humans are partaking in a relentless and unjust system. In this context then, it's easy to see why, in the debate between Ed Winters and the college student, the idea that we cannot convince everyone keeps being raised.

Acknowledging the difficulties of reality means accepting that we will inhabit – and encounter others who inhabit – comfortably numb worlds. It means condemning oneself to the constant risk of struggling with one's own responsibility, of feeling alienated from one's fellow humans, and of being overwhelmed by a reality whose harshness we understandably struggle to accommodate.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Herwig Grimm and the participants at the seminar for doctoral students at the Centre for Ethics as Study of Human Value for their helpful comments.

We acknowledge the Austrian Academy of Sciences for funding Erich Linder's research through a DOC-Fellowship, as well as Literar-Mechana for supporting Erich Linder's research through a doctoral completion grant.

References

- Aaltola, Elisa. 2019. "The Meat Paradox, Omnivore's Akrasia, and Animal Ethics." *Animals* 9 (12): 1125.
- Chapman, Demian, Sabine P. Wintner, Debra L. Abercrombie, Jimiane Ashe, Andrea M. Bernard, Shivji S. Mahamood, and Kevin Feldheim. 2013. "The Behavioural and Genetic Mating System of the Sand Tiger Shark, *Carcharias taurus*, an Intrauterine Cannibal." *Biology Letters* 9 (3): 20130003.
- Coetzee, John Maxwell. 2016. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton Classics. Princeton University Press.
- Diamond, Cora. 1996. "'We Are Perpetually Moralists': Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker, 79–109. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- . "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1 (2): 1–26.
- Earthling Ed. 2024. *Meat Eaters Try to Convince Vegan That What He's Doing Is POINTLESS*. YouTube video. Published September 30, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7t53XAiHPg>.
- Ferrara, Cecilia, and Catherine Nelson. 2019. "The Curse of Tail Docking: The Painful Truth Behind Italy's Pig Industry." *The Guardian*, January 19, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/19/curse-tail-docking-painful-truth-italy-pigs>.
- Ferrari, Arianna. 2024. *Carne Coltivata: La Rivoluzione a Tavola*. Fandango Libri.
- Festinger, Leon. 1978. *Theorie der Kognitiven Dissonanz*. Edited by Martin Irle and Volker Möntmann. Bern, Stuttgart, Wien: Huber.

- Gardner, Sebastian. 1993. *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Glatz, P. C., and G. Underwood. 2020. "Current Methods and Techniques of Beak Trimming Laying Hens, Welfare Issues and Alternative Approaches." *Animal Production Science* 61 (10): 968–989.
- Goddu, G. C. 2025. But is it Charity?. *Topoi*: 1-12.
- Knoll, Megan, Claire J. Starrs, and J.C. Perry. 2020. "Rationalization (Defense Mechanism)." In *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, edited by V. Zeigler-Hill and T.K. Shackelford. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3_1419
- Korsgaard, Christine. 2018. *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford University Press.
- Kowalski, Krzysztof, and Leszek Rychlik. 2018. "The Role of Venom in the Hunting and Hoarding of Prey Differing in Body Size by the Eurasian Water Shrew, *Neomys fodiens*." *Journal of Mammalogy* 99 (2): 351–362.
- Lingiardi, Vittorio, and Fabio Madeddu. 1994. *I meccanismi di difesa: Teoria, valutazione, clinica*. Milan: Raffaello Cortina.
- Mele, Alfred R. 2001. *Self-Deception Unmasked*. Princeton University Press.
- McMahan, Jeff. 2010. "The Meat Eaters." *New York Times*, September 1.
- McWilliams, Nancy. 2011. *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process*. Guilford Press, 128–129.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1956. "Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality." In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 30: 14–58. Edited by R. W. Hepburn and I. Murdoch.
- Packer, Craig, and A.E. Pusey. 1984. "Infanticide in Carnivores." In *Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives*, 31–42.
- Panizza, Silvia. 2020. "If Veganism Is Not a Choice: The Moral Psychology of Possibilities in Animal Ethics." *Animals* 10 (1): 145.
- Perry, John Christopher. 1990. *Defense Mechanism Rating Scales: Manual* (5th ed.). Boston: Cambridge University Press.
- Pollo, Simone F. 2008. *La morale della natura*. Laterza. Roma.
- Rachels, James. 1990. *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*. Oxford University Press.
- Singer, Peter. 2011. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 61.
- .2023. *Animal Liberation Now*. Random House, 99.

- Smith, Jennifer E., and Kay E. Holekamp. 2023. "Hunting Success in the Spotted Hyena: Morphological Adaptations and Behavioral Strategies." In *Social Strategies of Carnivorous Mammalian Predators: Hunting and Surviving as Families*, 139–175. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Stafford, Kevin J., and David J. Mellor. 2005. "Dehorning and Disbudding Distress and Its Alleviation in Calves." *The Veterinary Journal* 169 (3): 337–349.
- Thomas, Stephen. 1973. *Practical Reasoning in Natural Language*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2007. *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays*. Back Bay Books, 253.
- Winter, Hannah. 2024. "Artifishial: Naturalness and the CRISPR-Salmon." *Agriculture and Human Values* 1–2.

Article 7: Live and Let Die: The Distinction Between Doing and Allowing Harm and the Veterinarian's Integrity

Sub-research question 3: How do ordinary conceptions of animals ground self-examination? And what is its moral potential?

Status: Published in *EurSafe2024 Proceedings* (Conference proceedings EurSafe 2024)

Citation: Linder, E., 2024. "Live and Let Die—The Distinction between Doing and Allowing Harm and the Veterinarian's Integrity." In *EurSafe2024 Proceedings*, 348–353. Wageningen Academic.

Abstract: In this paper I will address the relevance of the distinction between doing and allowing harm (DDA) in applied ethics focusing on veterinary ethics. Such a distinction can help professionals, in this case veterinarians, in reflecting on the demands inherent to their profession and how these relate to their personal identity. I will show this by first illustrating the DDA. According to this distinction – if we always have reasons to reduce harm – doing harm is harder to justify than merely allowing harm. Many utilitarians claim that such a distinction does not hold and that our positive duties are equivalent to our negative duties. Instead, advocates of the DDA hold that this distinction is necessary to grant an agent their integrity, meaning their capacity to pursue the life projects they are committed to and that constitute the image that they have of themselves. Were they responsible for all the harm they allow, they would have to give up on their life projects and instead pursue the projects that best maximise utility. This would lead them to think of themselves as an impersonal agent devoid of any idiosyncrasies and personal history. The DDA shows us how agents are depicted in different ways by its advocates and its opponents: on the one hand we are confronted with impartial agents, on the other, we are asked to consider the importance of one's personal identity. I will then show how this distinction is reflected also in practical contexts, such as those faced by veterinarians in catastrophic circumstances. I will argue that some essential elements of the veterinarian profession seem to demand to give equal consideration to the harm directly done and the harm allowed. This in turn threatens other aspects of the individual veterinarian. In fact, veterinarians are not just veterinarians, they are people with particular desires and life-projects. Assuming that there is no distinction between doing and allowing harm would threaten parts of their identity by burdening them with excessive negative responsibility.

Keywords: negative responsibility, personal identity, utilitarianism.

1 Introduction

Veterinarians are sometimes tasked with the culling of large numbers of animals to prevent or limit outbreaks of disease. In the spring of 2001, for example, the United Kingdom was hit by an outbreak of the foot and mouth disease, a highly contagious disease of cloven-hoofed livestock (Jamal and Belsham, 2013). The animals were culled to limit the spread of the disease and avoid further economic losses and possible animal suffering (Tildesley et al. 2009). This poses a moral conflict for the veterinarians involved in the culling: on the one hand, were they to refuse to kill the animals they would be allowing widespread deaths and further severe societal impacts; on the other they would be directly harming animals who might themselves not even be at significant risk of dying or suffering. Apart from ethical concerns from the animal's perspective, veterinarians – who might even disagree with the culling policy (Law 2010, 60) – might endure significant psychological strain, known as “moral stress” and “moral injury” (see e.g., Arbe Montoya et al. 2019; Rollin 2014). Should veterinarians nonetheless be held responsible for the harm allowed were they not to cull the animals? Answering this question will depend on many factors tied to the particular context in which they find themselves. However, moral theory can shed some light on what consequences particular ways of approaching the issue might lead to. In this case, I suggest that discussions around the moral relevance of the distinction between doing and allowing harm can show different ways in which veterinarians might be led to think of themselves as agents and about their responsibility as individuals and as veterinarians.

Philosophers have reflected on whether agents should be held equally responsible for allowing harm as for directly causing it and have formulated the so-called “distinction between doing and allowing harm” (hereafter referred to as DDA). In the following, I aim to show how such a normative distinction can help inform applied ethics in general, with a particular focus on veterinary ethics. Depending on whether one believes that doing and allowing harm can be distinguished, one makes different assumption of how agents conceive themselves. Reflecting on the DDA allows us to see how agents can be led to think of themselves as neutral and impersonal agents and how this may pose an attack on their integrity, that is, their capacity to pursue the life projects they are committed to (see e.g., Smart and Williams 1973). I will firstly illustrate how contemporary philosophers understand the DDA and the relationship it holds with an agent's integrity: If advocates of the DDA are correct, establishing a distinction between doing and allowing harm provides a justification for agents to pursue projects that align with their self-identity, and therefore maintain their integrity. This distinction serves to prevent the agent from viewing themselves solely as a detached utilitarian actor burdened with excessive responsibilities. I will then illustrate the DDA's relevance to veterinarians

confronting catastrophic circumstances. While I will not draw definitive normative conclusions, this analysis will highlight how, one's stance on whether veterinarians should be held responsible for the allowed harm leads to different assumptions about how an agent should perceive themselves.

2 The distinction between doing and allowing harm

The debate around the DDA typically seeks to understand whether directly causing harm is more difficult to justify than merely allowing harm to occur. While both proponents and critics of the DDA agree that we should always seek to reduce harm and suffering whenever possible, they disagree on the extent of responsibility individuals bear for allowing harm to occur (Woollard 2015). Those who reject the DDA are typically consequentialists (act-utilitarians in particular) who claim that the only way an action can be properly judged is based on the consequences it produces; regardless of whether the agent acted intentionally or unintentionally, or whether the agent acted by directly causing something to happen or by merely letting it happen. What matters is the state of affairs of the world following the agent's action compared with that of the world preceding it (see e.g., Rachels 1975). In contrast, many advocates of the DDA claim that such a distinction is necessary to uphold an agent's integrity. I will next illustrate what I mean by integrity before proceeding to show how it is jeopardised by rejecting the DDA.

2.1 Integrity

The notion of integrity has been used in multiple ways in contemporary debate (see e.g., Cox et al. 2021). Therefore, it is important to clarify what I am referring to. To repeat, I am using the word to denote a person's capacity to consistently pursue the projects to which they are committed to and give meaning to their life. In other words, it is their capacity to become the kind of person they aspire to be. Integrity, as I use it, should not be confused with a person having what is sometimes described as "moral integrity," meaning a strict adherence to moral values. While someone can have such "moral integrity" even if one follows strictly utilitarian principles, such principles can actually infringe upon one's integrity in the former sense – one's project may be disrupted by one's utilitarian calculus recommending against them. In that sense, it would still make sense to talk about someone's integrity even though we think they are being immoral.

The basic idea of integrity, then, is that agents have a conception of the kind of person they aspire to be, a conception of an idealised version of themselves towards which they aspire to, and which gives meaning to their projects (Velleman 2002). As Bernard Williams put it, "projects and decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he (an

agent) is most closely identified” (Smart and Williams 1973, 116). Consider Johanna, an aspiring veterinarian who might decide to enrol at the university of veterinary medicine because she sees herself as someone who loves animals and wants to take care of them. Investing time and resources to build an education to become a veterinarian makes sense to Johanna against the background of a certain image she has of herself in the future. Most of the choices one makes are guided by the kind of person one aspires to become. A person’s integrity, then, is exemplified by the resolute fulfilment of the commitments and projects with whom they identify themselves. Advocates of the DDA argue that rejecting it can endanger one’s integrity by pushing them towards adopting an act-utilitarian perspective which, in turn, requires agents to relinquish an important part of their personal identity. I will now briefly show why rejecting the DDA, according to its advocates, leads to act-utilitarianism and then illustrate how this poses a threat to one’s integrity.

2.2.1 The DDA and maximising the good

Advocates of the DDA usually understand such a difference in terms of positive and negative rights (see e.g., Foot 1994; Quinn 1989). Negative rights are usually understood as rights of non-interference: Konstantin has a right not to be struck by Johanna. For Johanna to interfere on his right, she would have to do harm. Konstantin also has the positive right to be assisted every time he falls from the stairs. For Johanna to interfere with such a right, she would merely need to refrain from assisting him, thereby allowing the harm to occur (Woollard 2015, 8). Thus, instances of doing harm entail a breach of negative rights and cases of allowing harm involve a violation of positive rights.

Advocates of the DDA express concern that if we allow the distinction between positive and negative rights to dissolve, the obligations stemming from both would carry equal weight. This would mean that we would have only utilitarian calculations to assess our actions (Quinn 1980, 307), resulting in what Williams terms an overwhelming burden of “negative responsibility” (Smart and Williams 1973), where we would bear equal responsibility for the harm done and the harm allowed. In fact, opponents of the DDA argue that whenever we allocate our resources towards our personal ends, we neglect the needs of others and allow needless suffering (see e.g., Singer 1972; Unger 1996). This would mean that every project one has, should in principle be given up if the principle of utility would require it. As Fiona Woollard has noticed, agents would be discouraged to do long-terms projects since every time doing something else would bring about better consequences they would have to do so (Woollard 2015, 197). As a result, both personal projects and the kind of person one aspires to be would lose relevance, overshadowed by the weight of negative responsibility stemming from all the harm allowed.

Williams observes that this rationale would lead to “alienate him (the agent) in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone’s projects, including his own, and an output of optimific decision.” (Smart and Williams 1973, 117) and it “is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity” (Smart and Williams 1973, 117). If people were held accountable for every harm that they allow, morality would require them to think of themselves as dispensable and impartial and to give up on their project with which they identify themselves. Without integrity, agents would then lose what gives meaning to their actions, thus jeopardising the capacity to act autonomously in the first place.

For the purposes of this paper, I suggest resisting the temptation to try to settle down the debate over whether to embrace or reject the DDA. Instead, I suggest using it as a tool to explore how moral discourse reflects the way we think of ourselves as agents. In fact, the DDA shows us how agents are depicted in different ways by its advocates and its opponents: on the one hand we are confronted with impartial agents who only consider worth pursuing whatever life project brings about the best consequences. On the other, we are asked to consider individuals moulded by their distinct idiosyncrasies and characters. These individuals can make sense of their actions against the backdrop of their personal history. And it is with these two selves that veterinarians are faced. Indeed, veterinarians engaging in the culling of cows during a foot and mouth disease outbreak might ask themselves, as phrased by John Law: “What kind of person would one become if one becomes used to killing?” (Law 2010, 64).

3 Veterinarians and the DDA

To be precise, I am not claiming that veterinarians are torn between their personal aspirations and the demands of utilitarianism as a moral theory. In fact, becoming a veterinarian does not imply any commitment to utilitarianism. Moreover, there is not a strict and universally accepted set of rules that should guide a veterinarian’s conduct, nor is there a unique way in which veterinarians understand their roles (Deelen et al. 2020; Dürnberger 2022)

However, there are two elements inherent in the profession that nudge veterinarians in adopting a quasi-utilitarian rationale: the kind of aims that they commit themselves to in their oaths, and their practical expertise. In veterinarian’s oaths, they typically vow to “benefit society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, etc.” or commit utilizing their expertise for the “prevention of zoonoses” (Bones and Yeates 2012, 33). Here, societal benefits, the prevention of further deaths or of economic losses take the place of the “maximisation of utility” in reference to which the direct harming of some animals is justified. In other words: even

though “there are different versions of the bigger picture” (Law 2010, 65) a quasi-utilitarian rationale remains: bad consequences must be avoided regardless of whether one directly inflicts harm or simply allow it to occur. Additionally, due to their expertise, veterinarians appear to be the most dependable professional on which society can rely in times of crisis. They are, arguably, those who know best how to end an animal's life painlessly.

These supererogatory elements inherent in the veterinarian's profession, as is the case also in other kind of medical professions (Van Gils-Schmidt and Salloch, 2022, 3), seem to make the DDA lose relevance. In fact, even some advocates of the DDA might argue that given their expertise veterinarians qualify as “unique potential saviours” (Woollard 2015, 128) whose special capacity to reduce harm burden them with particular negative responsibility.

However, as Williams argued, such an understanding of agents does not account for the fact that their actions are not the actions of some abstract entity but those of a particular person who must make a choice for which they are genuinely responsible. In such a quasi-utilitarian perspective, the person behind the veterinarian vanishes and the beliefs, desires and plans that constitute the kind of person they take themselves to be ceases to matter. Of course, one might argue, a veterinarian might hold as their core commitment the plan to strive for the greater good of society; they might dismiss as irrational distractions other desires and aspects of their identity. This imaginary veterinarian would welcome the burden of negative responsibility as part of what makes their life meaningful. However, these plans would already be part of how this perfectly impartial veterinarian understand herself and takes her life to be worth living. The demands from a quasi-utilitarian rationality would be stemming from the agent itself and not from an external source. A more realistic veterinarian, instead, might have commitments and might hold values which sometimes conflict with what a culling policy expects veterinarians to do. For example, during the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak in the UK, cows who did not have the disease themselves were nonetheless required to be killed in farms for cautionary purposes (Law, 2010, 57). In such a situation a veterinarian might disagree with the policy (Law 2010, 60) and be asked to act against their own understanding of themselves. This would force them to give up on the image that they have of themselves, to fulfil a greater purpose.

Even though the policy might be the correct one, it seems problematic to claim that since veterinarians would be responsible for all the potential harm allowed, they should engage in the culling. Such an approach seems to dismiss the importance of the uniqueness of people besides their professional roles. It seems to overlook the distinctive sense in which each agent is responsible for the action that stem from themselves and from the decisions that they make.

4 Conclusions

These considerations about the DDA do not provide a clear answer to the initial question of whether veterinarians should be held responsible the harm allowed if they were they not to engage in the culling in zoonotic outbreaks or other catastrophic events. Indeed, besides the need to evaluate contextual differences, further theoretical considerations could be made. For example, one might still ask to what extent one's integrity should play a role in evaluating how an agent ought to act. After all, one might give meaning to their life by pursuing despicable projects.

Still, discussing the DDA in the context of applied ethics has allowed me to highlight a fundamental aspect of our moral life: the conception that we have of ourselves when we address both abstract and more concrete moral problems. Depending on whether one claims that there is a distinction between doing and allowing harm, one is implicitly assuming how an agent should conceive of themselves. Utilitarian understanding suggests that agents should aspire to be impersonal and neutral actors, whereas advocates of the DDA highlight the importance of one's own projects and personal identity. Both of these conceptions might be implicit in more concrete contexts, as is the case of veterinarians facing moral conflicts. Denying that there is a distinction between doing and allowing harm comes with the threat to an agent's integrity. And this, as even some utilitarians acknowledge (see e.g., Ashford 2000), certainly poses a problem which should not be easily dismissed.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Konstantin Eckl and Johanna Karg for their careful and thorough feedback which helped me to greatly improve my initial draft.

I thank also the Austrian Academy of Sciences for supporting my research through a DOC-Fellowship.

References

- Arbe Montoya, A. I., S. Hazel, S. M. Matthew, and M. L. McArthur. 2019. "Moral Distress in Veterinarians." *Veterinary Record* 185 (20): 631.
- Ashford, Elizabeth. 2000. "Utilitarianism, Integrity, and Partiality." *The Journal of Philosophy* 97 (8): 421–439.
- Bones, V. C., and J. W. Yeates. 2012. "The Emergence of Veterinary Oaths: Social, Historical, and Ethical Considerations." *Journal of Animal Ethics* 2 (1): 20–42.

- Cox, D., M. La Caze, and M. Levine. 2021. "Integrity." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/integrity/>.
- Deelen, Eileen, Franck L. Meijboom, T. J. Tobias, F. Koster, J. W. Hesselink, and T. B. Rodenburg. 2022. "The Views of Farm Animal Veterinarians About Their Roles and Responsibilities Associated with On-Farm End-of-Life Situations." *Frontiers in Animal Science* 3: 949080.
- Dürnberger, Christian. 2020. "Am I Actually a Veterinarian or an Economist? Understanding the Moral Challenges for Farm Veterinarians in Germany on the Basis of a Qualitative Online Survey." *Research in Veterinary Science* 133: 246–250.
- Foot, Philippa. 1994. "Killing and Letting Die." In *Killing and Letting Die*, edited by A. Steinbock and A. Norcross, 280–290. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Jamal, S. M., and G. J. Belsham. 2013. "Foot-and-Mouth Disease: Past, Present and Future." *Veterinary Research* 44: 1–14.
- Law, J. 2010. "Care and Killing: Tensions in Veterinary Practice." In *Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*, edited by A. Mol, I. Moser, and J. Pol, 57–72. Bielefeld.
- Quinn, Warren S. 1989. "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing." *The Philosophical Review* 98 (3): 287–312.
- Rachels, James. 1975. "Active and Passive Euthanasia." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (9): 78–80.
- Rollin, Bernard E. 2014. "Euthanasia and Moral Stress." In *Suffering*, 115–126. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1: 229–243.
- Smart, John. J. C., and Bernard O. Williams. 1973. *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tildesley, M. J., P. R. Bessell, M. J. Keeling, and M. E. Woolhouse. 2009. "The Role of Pre-Emptive Culling in the Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease." *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 276 (1671): 3239–3248.
- Unger, Peter K. 1996. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Gils-Schmidt, H. J., and S. Salloch. 2022. "Taking a Moral Holiday? Physicians' Practical Identities at the Margins of Professional Ethics." *Journal of Medical Ethics*, jme-2022-108500.
- Velleman, J. David 2002. "Motivation by Ideal." *Philosophical Explorations* 5 (2): 89–103.
- Woollard, Fiona. 2015. *Doing and Allowing Harm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Concluding Discussion

1 Tying up the loose ends

The aim of this dissertation has been to answer the following research question:

RQ: In what ways can ordinary conceptions of animals, understood from the perspective of particular agents, possess moral relevance without lapsing into moral relativism or unreflectively reinforcing the status quo?

In this dissertation, I have argued that ordinary conceptions of animals are relevant because of their role in practical reason (articles 1, 2, and 4). In particular, I have argued that conceiving of animals as e.g., “patients,” “rescues,” or “research tools” provides us with reasons that allow us to make sense of our actions when these align with our self-conception. The lion tamer can make sense of her actions as her own only if she conceives of lions as circus animals – beings that can be tamed, trained, and exhibited before an audience. If she were to give up this specific way of conceiving of lions, she would need to abandon her self-conception as a lion tamer, along with the associated actions that support her autonomous actions when interacting with other lions. Besides their necessary role for an agent’s autonomy, I argued that the relationship that ordinary conceptions have with our self-conception allows us to engage in a particular form of moral thinking often overlooked by orthodox approaches to animal ethics: self-examination. In sum, to answer the research question I defended what I will call the thesis of “the moral relevance of ordinary conceptions” (Hereafter “MOC”):

MOC: Ordinary conceptions of animals are of moral relevance from the agent’s perspective because of the role they play in practical reasoning: they are necessary for an agent to act autonomously when interacting with animals and allow the agent to engage in self-examination.

Even though I have provided the main answer to the research question, there is still a worry that I need to address. I need to clarify whether my thesis ends up lapsing into moral relativism or in an unreflective acceptance and endorsement of the status quo. Indeed, throughout this dissertation I have put forward a thicker picture of human-animal interaction than that provided by the orthodoxy. Instead of a rational agent on one side and a sentient being on the other, I have argued for the importance to think about our encounters with the other animals as encounters between self-reflecting agent’s trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them on one side and animals

encountered in the midst of the practices, language games and the idiosyncratic perspectives of particular agents on the other. I have endorsed a position that highlights the importance of the relationship between practical reason and particular ways of conceiving the other animals. A position that does not dismiss cultural and idiosyncratic contingencies as morally irrelevant but rather understands them as the very fabric that allow agents to act autonomously and make sense of themselves.

It is precisely this attention to everyday life that raises the worry of losing the high ground for substantial ethical reflection. As noticed throughout the dissertation by gaining in psychological and contextual accuracy one runs the risk of undermining the very distance and impartiality needed to reflect on and criticise current practices. MOC seems then to favour, or at least seems not to oppose, the idea that agents are justified in treating animals according to the ways in which they already conceive of them. That is, MOC risks ending up with a relativist position or in unreflectively endorsing the status quo (I will clarify in the next section why these are two different pitfalls for MOC).

In article 4, I already argued that the scope of MOC concerns the way in which ordinary conceptions allow agents to make sense of their actions and not in how they justify them. This argument seems to be at first glance sufficient to fend off the charge of relativism. But a few details remain to be clarified: why precisely should we reject a relativist approach? And even if MOC is not concerned with moral justification doesn't it risk anyway to limit what can reasonably be demanded of moral agents?

In section 2, I will clarify the nature of the risk of relativism: I will explain why accepting MOC does not require a commitment to relativism and clarify why it would be a problem if it had to commit to it. This will be done by analysing three ways in which we can understand the problem of relativism. In section 3, I will address the issue that MOC might unduly restrict what morality can demand of autonomous agents and reject the claim that it does. In section 4, I will both show that MOC is also compatible with moral individualism (henceforth, MI), and illustrate what difference there is between an agent that accepts both MOC and MI and one that only accepts MI (as the advocates of the orthodoxy in animal ethics such as Peter Singer do).¹

2 MOC, practices and justificatory reasons

In this section I will clarify what sort of charge the relativist objection amounts to and why it is possible to separate MOC to a commitment to relativism.

¹ I fleshed out what I meant by "orthodoxy in animal ethics" in Articles 2 and 5.

Broadly speaking, the charge of relativism is that MOC risks ending up admitting that any ways of treating the other animals is justified as long as there is a practice supporting that particular treatment.

Such an accusation relies in mischaracterising MOC as a thesis about the *legitimacy* and *necessity* of justifying particular ways of treating animals in virtue of the ways in which they are conceptualised and in virtue of the practices in which these conceptions stem from. According to this interpretation of MOC, every assessment of the legitimacy of a particular action *cannot but* ultimately rely on an appeal to a practice. Such a thesis would then hold that “the reasoning by which we figure out how to modify our practices is itself a practice, also subject to modification by a practice, and so on indefinitely, with nothing but *practices all the way down*.” (Velleman 2009, 80 italics in the original). Following Velleman’s expression I will call this thesis the “practice-all-the-way-down” thesis (hereafter “PWD”).²

PWD: all practical reasons must, and cannot but, ultimately be grounded in practices.

The allure of PWD is that it provides us with an alternative approach to the rationalist moral theories that orthodox approaches to animal ethics are committed to. As illustrated in articles 1 and 2, instead of deducing how one ought to act from impersonal and abstract moral theories, the advocate of PWD unearths our reasons for action from the practices and forms of life in which we grew up and were trained to make sense of the world. Nonetheless, there are several drawbacks to accepting PWD. But before illustrating them, I want to clarify why PWD and MOC are different theses and why a commitment to MOC does not come with the acceptance of PWD.

² This sort of approach has been often attributed to Wittgensteinian approaches to ethics (see Article 2, 4, and 5; Diamond 2001, Velleman 2009, 80; Pleasants 2006, 332; May 2014; Monsó and Grimm 2019). According to Wittgensteinians, by flattening the complexity of our moral life and populating it with a world of beings wearing the same uniform of “being with interest” or “being with rights” conjured from the ivory towers of philosophical theorizing we risk sawing of the branch of the tree of morality on which we sit (see Gaita 2004, 168). This has often left moral individualists puzzled (see McMahan 2005; May 2014; see Winther and Myskja 2023 for a response to McMahan), as to whether Wittgensteinians were advocating for an approach that justifies our status quo.

That is not the way in which I think we should understand Diamond’s remarks, or other’s Wittgensteinian’s remarks. In fact, Cora Diamond urged moral philosophers to “attend to the texture of life, to modes of responsiveness, and to the relation between texture of life and particular acts, thoughts, responses” (Diamond 1997, 221). She was urging us to avoid taking one aspect of our moral life, e.g., principled based moral thinking, and reduce our understanding claim that that was what moral life was like (Diamond 1997, 221). In doing so, Diamond, as well as other Wittgensteinians arguably refuse to fully commit to an exclusively practice-based approach because of the risk of falling into relativism and usually find other solutions in different forms of moral realism (e.g., Crary 2016; Diamond 2019).

What I take Diamond to be doing, was to urge us to avoid moving “from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity” (Diamond 2003, 12). In this dissertation, I have taken one strand that constitutes the texture of our moral life and examined it up close, showing that the difficulties we face in interacting with each and every animal – so similar yet so different from each other and from us – is tied to how we think about both them and us. By focusing on this particular aspect of our moral life and by framing it as a problem in practical reason I have focused exclusively on one aspect of the problem posed by the diversity in which we treat the other animals (Indeed, we might say that I have partially reduced a difficulty of reality, again, to a philosophical problem in the vicinity).

The difference between MOC and PWD is that they explain the *moral relevance* of ordinary conceptions in different ways: the scope of MOC is to identify two specific ways in which ordinary conceptions are of relevance – by providing us with the necessary ground to act autonomously when we interact with other animals and by allowing us to engage in self-examination; PWD, instead, is interested in a different area of moral reasoning, that of moral justification. In articles 2 and 4 I provide a distinction that can help to clarify more precisely the point where MOC differs from PWD: the distinction between explanatory and justificatory reasons. To recall: explanatory reasons are to be understood as “reasons why” someone acted in a particular way, whereas justificatory reasons are “reasons counting in favour of” or “reasons for” an action. So that for example, if I see Jessica treating her patients carelessly, I might explain her actions by saying that she has a lot going on in her personal life (reasons why she acted that way) while at the same time holding that she is wrong to act like that, because the patient is not well treated (reason in favour of not acting that way). I would be explaining her actions without justifying them.

The fact that I can explain someone’s actions – or that she can explain her own actions to herself – does not entail that she is justified in acting as she did. There is a leap from the claim that someone’s actions are explicable to the claim that they are justified, and it is not one we are required to make. As I argue in article 4, MOC just asks us to accept that ordinary conceptions provide us with explanatory reasons, not justificatory ones: The fact that an agent is able to make sense of her actions as her own and is able to reflect on herself through the way in which she conceives of the world does not mean that her actions are justified: I might be able to make sense of the way in which I mistreat my parents because I think of myself as an awful son, but at the same time hold that I have reasons *not* to identify with that aspect of myself and try to become a better son (see also article 6). It is then conceptually possible to distinguish between these kinds of reasons.

The same applies to the distinction between MOC and PWD: while the former only commits us to thinking that it is intelligible for an agent to treat a cow, for example, as livestock, since conceiving the animal in this way allows her to make sense of her actions as those of someone who sees herself, for instance, as a farmer. The latter, by contrast, would imply that, because she conceives the cow as livestock, she is justified in treating it accordingly. But the leap from MOC to PWD requires further justification as the farmer could still ask herself whether she is really justified in treating the cow as livestock. The fact that she can make sense of her actions as her own does not entail their justification without further argument. It is then possible to distinguish MOC and PWD. But why *should* we do that?

The main argument I advance in the dissertation for maintaining a distinction between explanatory and justificatory reasons is that if we do not distinguish them we risk ending up unreflectively endorsing the status quo: If everything that can give us a reason to explain an action would thereby justify it, we would lose any ground to provide any criticism whatsoever. Which, in turn, would mean giving up the idea of engaging in any form of meaningful moral reflection (see article 4).³

In article 2, however, my co-author and I contend that a Wittgensteinian, practice-based approach can respond to this charge, allowing for ethical reflection. Given that our account of the Wittgensteinian approach in article 2 and in PDW accords a preponderant role to practices in moral life, there is an apparent contradiction that needs to be explained. In one paper, I argue that PDW should be rejected; in the other, I suggest that there are reasons to accept it.

The reason for this apparent contradiction is that PWD can be interpreted in two different ways. In fact, in the main research question, as formulated at the beginning of this concluding discussion, I mention two possible risks that come with an approach that focuses on the moral significance of ordinary conceptions: the first is that one risks *unreflectively reinforcing the status quo* and the second that one risks *lapsing into moral relativism*. These are two different problems that one has to worry about – let’s call them the “unreflective conservative” and the “relativist” interpretation of PWD.

I shall first briefly summarise the reasons for explaining why the unreflective interpretation should be rejected. I will then do the same with the relativist interpretation, as it faces significant difficulties that were not addressed in article 2.

2.1 The unreflective conservative interpretation of PWD

The unreflective interpretation of PWD is constituted by three claims:

1. We should and cannot but gain all our reasons to act from the practices in which we find ourselves (PWD).
2. Among these reasons are all justificatory reasons (follows from the first claim).
3. Ordinary conceptions gain their normative force from the practices from which they stem (follows from the first two claims).

C. Ordinary conceptions of animals justify our actions in the respective practices.

Such a position risks justifying the status quo and unreflectively accepting the prevailing norms of one’s cultural milieu. If ordinary conceptions provide justificatory reasons through the practices in

³ Some authors would bite the bullet and agree that philosophers can limit themselves to describing a situation (c.f. Philips 1992).

which we encounter other animals, then merely pointing to the practice would suffice to justify our actions. We would be justified in hunting deer because they are considered game, in using rats for experiments because they are scientific tools, and in caring for dogs and cats because they are patients. According to the unreflective interpretation, practices function as the user's guide for what treatment of animals is justified. Right and wrong are established solely within a practice, allowing us to do anything the practice prescribes. In other terms, the unreflective conservative does not understand justificatory reasons⁴ as *prima facie* reasons – considerations that count in favour of the morality of an action which still require further reasons to draw a conclusion⁵ – but rather as *decisive reasons* (see e.g., Parfit 2011, 33), that is, reasons that would override other normative considerations and provide a justification for our actions.

In fact, the leap from third claim to C shows that the “normative forces” gained by ordinary conception is to be understood as a complete justification for an agent's actions. However, assuming, as the unreflective position does, that justificatory reasons automatically provide justification raises an intuitive moral concern and two methodological concerns that warrants its dismissal.

The intuitive moral concern is that it is not clear why this argument shouldn't be applied also to cases involving human beings: it is common practice in various state-run detention systems to subject detainees to physical beatings, sleep deprivation, denial of medical care, and other forms of torture. Accepting that something being a practice automatically justifies an agent's conduct leads down to the slipperiest of slopes, as any practice and action could be justified in virtue of the fact that there is an existing practice that supports it. If for something to be considered legitimate it would suffice to

⁴ As reminder about how I use the term “justificatory” and “explanatory,” let me briefly recall that when discussing the distinction between justificatory and explanatory reasons, I did not draw a distinction regarding the *nature* of such reasons. That is, I did not take a stance on whether these reasons must be “internal” (e.g., Williams 1981) or “external” (e.g., Parfit 1984; Scanlon 2014), whether they must be reasons to which the agent has psychological access or not. Some authors (see also Railton 1986; Parfit 1997; Scanlon 2014), argue that facts can provide us with reasons that count in favour of an action and that these reasons hold independently of whether an agent recognises them as her reasons. On this view, to fail to act on such reasons is to act wrongly, or against reason itself. For instance, the orthodoxy in animal ethics would take this stance and claim that the fact of sentience provides us with a reason to act in a certain way, and that if we fail to do so, we act wrongly – against reason – whether we are aware of it or not (see Regan 1984; de-Lazari Radek and Singer 2014)

In this dissertation, I took a different route and focused on the *function* that reasons play in our moral life (see article 4). Following Velleman, I focused on our practice of giving reasons to explain and/or justify our actions. In doing so, we may appeal to the same fact – on one occasion to explain our actions, and on another to justify what we have done. This still leaves conceptual space to claim that an agent may have reasons of which she is unaware. In other words, we might still accept MOC and hold that an agent has reasons to act in some morally required way while at the same time lacking autonomy. Peter Singer might hold both that ordinary conceptions are necessary for autonomous action and that an agent who can only conceive of animals in way that bring about suffering is acting wrongly.

⁵ The fact that something counts as a reason in favour of the correctness of an action does not mean that it establishes its correctness *tout court* and absolves us from blame: we might have other reasons that count against justifying that actions. For example, the fact that I am starving might count as a reason in favour of killing an animal to eat it, but having some other source of food available would count against – and probably trump the reasons to kill the animal.

find out a motley crew of ill-minded people that engage in the same activity, it seems like anything could be permitted as long as it is done within the contours of an established practice.

The first methodological issue concerns the fact that gesturing toward an ordinary conception of an animal and refusing to give further reason to justify one's actions seems arbitrary. Refusing to give further reasons, where a further demand for reasons is warranted, only shows that the agent involved has given up the will to reflect on the matter at hand. As its name suggests, the unreflective conservative fails to consider the possibility that agents can question and reflect on their actions rather than blindly following accepted cultural norms – a capacity that is central to our understanding of ethics and of living a good life. In fact, it assumes that the reasons an agent has are automatically decisive. But agents can reflect on their actions and this fact and its moral significance should be something that any moral theory should be able to address and explain.

The second methodological concern follows the first. Imagine that an agent's action are justified by one practice he is involved in but are prohibited by another: Steve is both director of a no-kill shelter and the council's animal-health officer and conceives of animals respectively as beings-to-be-cared-for and as potential health hazard. When a contagious disease spreads in the shelter, the former role gives him reasons to protect the animals, while the latter obliges him to cull them to prevent wider harm. What shall Steve do (if both options were legal)? If it is only practices that provide him reasons to act, then he will have two contrasting solution and no way to decide which one to adopt. The only thing he can do is to choose on a whim which way to go since giving further reason to choose one practice above the other would not be an option: as he would need some sort of overarching rational principle to decide which practice is the appropriate one. But this has been ruled out by PWD who only admits practices as grounds for justificatory reasons.

These substantial problems of the unreflective conservative position warrant its dismissal. However, they do not warrant a complete rejection of PWD yet. In fact, the relativist interpretation accounts for the fact that agents are reflecting beings and not just helpless pawns under the thumb of cultural and social norms. Agents are able to consider a variety of justificatory reasons and decide upon which of these they ultimately ought to act.

2.2 The relativist interpretation of PWD

I am now going to flesh out the relativist interpretation of PWD by drawing on results of articles 2 and 3 and clarify why there are still substantial reasons to reject PWD in this most sophisticated version. The relativist adds to the precedent argument one claim:

4. We are able to reflect on reasons stemming from different practices and decide whether to endorse them.

In doing so the understanding of the conclusion appears much less radical than the previous one. As it only amounts to the fact that:

- C. Ordinary conceptions of animals provide us with reasons that count in favour of our actions.

Such a conclusion then does not tell us that agents are just allowed to passively accept the reasons stemming from ordinary conceptions but that they are rather able to reflect on them as reasons counting in favour or against some actions. In article 2 while defending the Wittgensteinian approach, we claim that such an approach “helps us to reflect on these descriptions and nuances. It asks us to try out different concepts and compare them against each other. Is this animal necessarily a pest? Or can we treat it like a liminal noisy neighbour? Is the laboratory rat a tool? Or, does it make, after all, sense to conceive it as a companion?” (article 2, 52). According to this understanding, it is true that we derive our sources of normativity only from the practices in which we are embedded in and the ordinary conceptions that stem from them; but we are nonetheless able to reflect on them and decide autonomously which ordinary conceptions to apply. So even though ordinary conceptions provide us with reasons that count in favour for an action, that is, they provide us with justificatory reasons, these reasons are not to be understood as decisive but as considerations that the agent can ponder on, that is as *prima facie* reasons. Such an understanding of PWD seems more acceptable, but there are still reasons why it should be rejected and therefore kept apart from MOC.

Let’s consider an example: imagine that someone says that our way of treating cows as livestock should be stopped in favour of treating them, e.g., as companions. Someone else could step in and suggest that we should treat them according to yet another practice – e.g., the practice of dealing with laboratory animals – and so on. How are we to decide which practice provides us the Archimedean point?

The advocate of the unreflective interpretation of PWD would face the abovementioned problems and end up choosing on a whim. The relativist interpretation, instead, would be equipped with the recognition that we are able to reflect on the reasons that ordinary conceptions give us (claim nr. 4). In fact, to counter the problem of the unreflective acceptance of the status quo some Wittgensteinians have contended that ethical reflection is itself one of the practices that constitute our form of life. Nigel Pleasants, for example, argues that we are not necessarily bound to endorse a particular concept merely because it features within our form of life. As he puts it: “From the standpoint of language-

game examination, it can be seen that the language-games of moral debate, disagreement, conflict, and attempts at persuasion are a core feature of our social life. These critical and disputational practices are, I take it, as much a part of our ‘forms of life’” (Pleasants 2006, 332).

Even though we have endorsed this answer in article 2, now that we are assessing whether we have reasons to endorse the relativist interpretation of PWD the following issue should be addressed: Unless one grants that practices such as ethical reflection and moral debate possess some priority over the uncritical reproduction of prevailing norms – and unless one accepts that these practices must meet certain standards to count as genuine reflection or critique – then one lacks any principled basis for favouring reflection over the blind reproduction of a practice. Without such a standard, an agent could either arbitrarily appeal to any practice whatsoever without providing further justification for it or end up into an infinite regress, where each practices provide her with different and conflicting reasons: once the agent attempts to justify one practice by appealing to another, she will have to justify, in turn, that latter practice by reference to yet another, and so on *ad infinitum*, since none would possess any ultimate justificatory authority. The advocate of the relativist interpretation of PWD is then faced with a dilemma: either giving up the idea that it is only practices that provide us with reasons for action and be forced to identify a different source of normativity and rejecting PWD,⁶ or lapse back into an infinite regress.

In article 3, we pursued a different strategy to further substantiate PWD by identifying a firm ground underlying our practices and language games. Such a ground could deflect the abovementioned problems faced by the relativist position. To this end I will now discuss some results obtained from article 3, where we again engaged with Wittgensteinian authors and discussed the notion of “moral certainty.” Such notion could further refine the relativist interpretation of PDW and fend off the abovementioned problems. In the following I will briefly discuss this attempt and show that also this version of the relativist interpretation of PWD should be rejected.

2.3 Relativism reloaded: About the possibility of substantiating PWD with moral certainties

As discussed in the second article, justificatory reasons obtain in the presence of two elements, one is a conception of the animal, and the other a normative ground that imbues that conception with normativity. The advocates of the orthodoxy put forward an abstract conception of the animal and

⁶Velleman, for example, claims that even though practices are part of what provide us with reasons for action, whether these reasons actually count as reasons-for-us is determined by what is constitutive of agency and ultimately of rationality. And Velleman thinks that it is the *drive* for self-understanding that provides the ultimate ground for our reasons to act (see e.g., Velleman 2009).

employ rationalistic moral theories to show in what way such conceptions acquire moral relevance: the animal is depicted as a being capable of feeling pain and pleasure, and its significance is justified in virtue of, e.g., a utilitarian hedonic principle. PWD does a specular move by employing ordinary conceptions and the norms that constitute a specific practice. As I just clarified, merely relying on practices and ordinary conceptions seems to leave PWD open to serious problems.

In article 3, however, we propose an alternative solution that aims to preserve the idea that ordinary conceptions of animals are relevant because they offer justificatory reasons, while avoiding the problems discussed above. This possible solution consists in adopting the Wittgensteinian notion of *moral certainty*. As discussed in that article, this notion is supposed to identify a common moral ground, a shared benchmark according to which one can establish the rightness and wrongness of some actions – and consequently of particular practices and the adoption of specific ordinary conceptions. This strategy would then attain a secure pivot point from which to bring about ethical reflection and stop the regress that the relativist interpretation faced but at the same time maintain a closeness to our moral life and the perspective of agents embedded in particular contexts.

Wittgensteinian authors (e.g., Pleasants 2008, 2009, 2015; Hermann 2015, Deininger, Aigner and Grimm 2024) argue that there exist so-called “hinge propositions” which are immune to doubt, forming the very foundation upon which any moral discourse can take place; they refer to these as “moral certainties.” Examples of such certainties include statements such as “killing is wrong,” “equals ought to be treated equally,” and “cheating is wrong.” The distinction between these certainties and the propositions generated by moral theories lies in their embeddedness within our practices and in transcendental forms of thought. Moral certainties are part of ordinary language and everyday reasoning, and do not require engagement in the abstract, ivory-tower style of reflection characteristic of rationalistic moral theories. Consequently, moral certainties may provide the stable ground that other practices lack, functioning as a normative foundation that guides our understanding of which ordinary conceptions we ought to adopt. In this framework, one could still derive justificatory reasons from ordinary conceptions and practices, yet the range of conceptions permitted to endorse would be constrained by moral certainties.

This solution must also be rejected. In article 3, we argued that all contemporary accounts of moral certainty fail to satisfy what we termed first the “foundational” and second the “universal conditions.” For the purposes of this conclusion, instead of summarising again the results of article 3, I will clarify why the notion of moral certainty does not succeed in providing a solution to the problem at hand – namely, establishing a robust foundation for PWD that avoids slipping into an infinite regress or in arbitrariness. To illustrate this point, I will consider the moral certainty discussed by Deininger,

Aigner and Grimm (2024), namely, “equals are to be treated equally” (hereafter, the “certainty of equality”).

The certainty of equality is particularly suitable for the present purposes because it closely aligns with the moral individualist’s thesis. This thesis holds that beings possessing the same individual properties ought to be treated equally and is regarded by the orthodoxy in animal ethics as a secure foundation for moral thought (e.g., Rachels 1990; McMahan 2005). The difference between moral individualism (MI) and the certainty of equality lies in the fact that the latter specifies how to determine whether two individuals are equals: by claiming that they share morally relevant intrinsic properties, the moral relevance of which is established through moral theory. By contrast, the certainty of equality does not specify who counts as equal and thereby allows the advocate of PWD to employ ordinary conceptions as a *tertium comparationis*. Instead of claiming that we ought to treat Bugs and Roger as equals because they are both sentient beings, the advocate of PWD could claim that their equal treatment should be based on the fact that they are both pets (one being Jessica’s daughter’s pet and the other Jessica’s client’s pet). Thus, holding both PWD and the certainty of equality would mean that Jessica is obligated to treat them as equals: both ought to be treated as pets. In doing so, the advocate of PWD would not need the abstractions required by MI but could rely exclusively on ordinary conceptions of animals while maintaining a secure moral ground represented by the certainty of equality.

Besides the general problems that the very notion of moral certainty presents (see article 3), adopting the certainty of equality will not provide a solution for those advocates of the PWD who wish to claim that ordinary conceptions give us justificatory reasons and that we do not risk merely justifying the status quo or fall into an infinite regress. Consider Jessica the veterinarian, who faces the three rabbits Roger, Bugs, and a pest. As I have just mentioned, the first two are pets. However, Roger is also a patient, and the third rabbit is conceived only as a pest. If the way she treats them depends on these ordinary conceptions and the certainty of equality, then, when deciding how to treat them, Jessica will be constrained only by the fact that she ought to treat them according to some ordinary conception (PWD) and that she must treat every animal she can conceive under that conception in the same way (certainty of equality). In this case, it seems that Jessica is committed to treating Roger and Bugs in the same way (as pets) and is permitted to treat the pest as a pest, as long as she puts them in two different categories. But both the certainty of equality and PWD remain neutral on which ordinary conception Jessica is allowed to adopt.

What if someone shows her that she could, after all, treat the pest as a pet? She could come to see the pest as a pet and call him Thumper. Or, alternatively, what if someone suggests to her that Bugs is, after all, a pest? He is quite a burden on her finances and time, and he destroys all the cables in her

home. What reasons does she have to engage with one conception rather than another? What would be her reason to endorse or to ignore the suggestion to treat the pest as Thumper or to treat Bugs as a pest? The certainty of equality alone does not allow us to determine whether some conceptions are more appropriate than others; it merely establishes that if two beings are equal in some respect, they ought to be treated equally in that respect.

If Jessica can rely only on the certainty of equality and on ordinary conceptions to answer these questions, she could either unreflectively adopt the practice she already endorses, choose on a whim which ordinary conception she prefers, or remain trapped in an infinite oscillation between ordinary conceptions and their practices. There would be no principled constraint preventing her from treating Thumper as livestock rather than as a companion simply because she feels like it or is accustomed to doing so.

In light of these problems, we should treat with caution the idea that claims that the moral relevance of ordinary conceptions of animals lies in the fact that they justify our actions. Neither suggested interpretation of PWD appears to provide a secure foundation for critical moral thought; rather, both seem to leave us either in an unreflective acceptance of the world as it is or endlessly weighing a set of equally plausible conceptions and practices. Since we can distinguish between explanatory and justificatory reasons, and since PWD should be rejected, we can dismiss both the claim that MOC entails PWD and the view that it ought to subscribe to it.

3 The problem from within: Does MOC limit what can be reasonably demanded of moral agents?

I have argued that MOC is safe from the accusation of losing the capacity to provide moral criticism because it merely concerns the role that ordinary conceptions play in enabling agents to make sense of themselves. It regards the relationship between ordinary conceptions and explanatory reasons. Since the charges of unreflective conservatism and relativism concern the relationship between ordinary conceptions and justificatory reasons, and since we can distinguish between the two, MOC is absolved from those charges. There is, however, a further objection that I should address.

In article 4, I argued that ordinary conceptions are relevant because they ground explanatory reasons, and that these reasons are necessary for an agent to act autonomously when interacting with other animals (article 4, 95-96). Moreover, I maintained that justificatory reasons must also be construable as explanatory if the agent is to act autonomously on them (article 4, 96-98). Here is where the concern may arise: if an agent's self-understanding depends on being able to conceive of an animal only

through a limited set of ordinary conceptions, then the kinds of reasons that the agent can think of and that also provide her with reasons to act will be limited to those through which she understands herself.

In other words:

P1) Ordinary conceptions of animals underpin explanatory reasons (article 4, 91-94)

P2) Explanatory reasons are necessary for an agent's actions to be autonomous (article 4, 95-96)

P3) Justificatory reasons must be encompassed by explanatory reasons for an agent to act autonomously on them. (article 4, 96-98)

C An agent's autonomous actions are justified only if she can explain her actions as her own.

This leads us to a problem akin to that faced by the PWD thesis: if the argument is sound, then the only reasons counting in favour of an action that the agent has are those in line with her self-understanding. This means that, for example, Mr. Doom, the hunter that we encounter at the end of article 4, has reasons to treat Roger as, for example, his companion only if he can conceive of himself as someone for whom it makes sense to treat Roger as a companion. If, instead, he is able to conceive of him *only* as a quarry or as food then – according to MOC – it looks like we can't really say that he has reasons to treat Roger as a companion, or as an end in itself and still act autonomously.

In other words, since MOC implies that the only reasons for action that an agent has must be in line with her self-conception, even though MOC does not buy *directly* into PWD, it nevertheless limits the set of justificatory reasons that agents have *indirectly*. This problem seems even more severe than the one faced by PWD, because MOC would force us to admit that we do not have any grounds to claim that anyone has reasons to act autonomously in any way that does not accord to their self-understanding. So that if Mr. Doom insists, that he only understands himself as a hunter in respect to animals, then we will have to concede that he has only reasons to treat animals as quarry or food. This would amount to end up defending some sort of moral subjectivism, or in alternative to give up the idea that an agent's autonomy is of moral relevance.

Accepting this conclusion would be too hasty, however. In fact, even if, on the one hand, it is true that someone like Mr. Doom – who is able to conceive of animals only as resources and quarry – seems to lack the *necessary* grounds for autonomy if deprived of those conceptions, the fact that he is unable to see that animals are also beings that have their own ends and are sentient should suggest us that he does not satisfy all the *sufficient* conditions to be considered autonomous: Mr. Doom seems to lack a basic shared understanding of the world that is necessary for autonomy. So that even if he'd

be granted the possibility to act in line with his self-conception we would still have doubts about him being overall an autonomous person given the fact that he is unable to recognise that animals are more than resources and quarry and that he is more than a hunter. In other words, a minimal shared understanding of oneself and of reality is also necessary to act autonomously (see e.g., Killmister 2013). Indeed, in both articles 4 and article 7, I worked with a very minimal understanding of autonomy, highlighting the relationship between self-understanding and autonomous action. This idea, however, as I noted in article 4, constitutes a necessary condition for the concept of autonomy but leaves ample room to argue that it is not a sufficient one. It would be odd and counterintuitive to assume that just because an agent understands her actions she is acting autonomously. Being able to say “that’s pretty much in line with how I expect myself to behave” cannot be sufficient for us to say that we were in full control of what we do or that we endorse what we do. Sometimes we have a poor understanding of ourselves. Sometimes we are trapped by an image of ourselves and of the world and such poor understanding puts us in such conditions where we lack autonomy (see e.g., Rawls 1971; O’Neil 1986; Korsgaard 2009; Killmister 2013; Pugh 2020, 34-58).⁷

We would be ending up like Sartre’s waiter, who takes on his role as a waiter so much as to disappear in it and fails to acknowledge that he is much more than a social role (Sartre 2007, 59).⁸ His whole personality is reduced to a cartoonish version of a waiter, and all his movements become “a little to precise, a little too rapid” (Sartre 2007, 59). He walks like “some kind of automaton” (Sartre 2007, 59) and all “his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seems to be mechanisms” (Sartre 2007, 59). He ignores the rest of his whole self to become a character and in doing so he slowly ceases to be a person. But people are not characters they are multifaceted beings.

The same is true for Mr. Doom, who claims he cannot see himself as anything other than a hunter, nor animals as anything other than prey or quarry to be killed. Mr Doom is failing to understand that he is more than just a hunter. He can’t just be a hunter because he is not a cartoon character.⁹ He is also a rational self-reflecting and vulnerable animal. Moreover, claiming that animals are *just* livestock and tools, shows a failure to understand some basic shared facts about the world: some of

⁷ Of course, one could favour a more minimal understanding of autonomy and merely stick to the definition that requires autonomous action to be self-governed. The issue with this objection is that it risks stretching to much the notion of autonomy: it risks leading us to admit that whatever the understanding of the person might be they are acting autonomously: so that someone who has been lied to or who has been conned are acting autonomously.

⁸ To be clear: Sartre discusses his example in reference to the problem of bad faith and uses the example of the waiter to show how we risk end up confusing what is for-itself with what is in-itself (See, Gardner 1993, 36-37; Sartre 2007, 59). But his example nonetheless serves my purposes of showing how blatantly mistaken we can be about ourselves.

⁹ The joke about the fact that Mr. Doom in “Who framed Roger Rabbit?” is a cartoon-character disguised as a real person is intended.

the beings that populate the world are the kind of beings that go around minding their own business, that have their own interests and concerns and exist even if we do not exploit them.

It seems counterintuitive to accept that someone unable to recognise some basic fact – or at least some basic shared assumption of the world – can be fully considered autonomous in that context.¹⁰ The answer to the claim that MOC risk's ending up with moral subjectivism would be that the definition of autonomy as requiring an agent to be able to make sense of one's own actions, would not be sufficient without qualifying that "making sense" should include a basic shared understanding of the world. And the fact that animals are not just tools but also sentient beings, that they can be our companions and have their own interests and goals is part of this understanding. So, if we assume that animals really are, among other things, beings that have their own ends, then Mr. Doom's refusal to understand shows a failing to accept some basic understanding of the world. And this counts against the fact that he is a fully autonomous agent.

Thus, MOC does not collapse into moral solipsism if we accept that autonomous agents must be capable of engaging, or at least attempting to engage, with the world or with our shared understanding of it.¹¹ Hence, MOC does not compel us to adopt either relativism or subjectivism.

4 Are MOC and MI compatible?

In section 4 of article 4 I claimed that MOC is compatible with MI,¹² let me now clarify and elaborate more on this claim. MOC is a thesis about the moral significance of ordinary conception of animals. Instead of stating that ordinary conceptions are of moral relevance because they provide us with justificatory reasons, it states that they are relevant for their role in grounding explanatory reasons. Moreover, since MOC is neutral about whether ordinary conceptions of animals provide us with justificatory reasons it leaves open the possibility to claim that it is only intrinsic properties that provide us with justificatory reasons. In other words, it leaves open the possibility to claim that MOC and MI are compatible because the latter is a thesis that concerns the justification of our treatment of

¹⁰ The argument I just made would face some problems in the case we are dealing with a culture whose whole worldview would rest upon the possibility that its members could inhabit specific social roles, as for example, Jonathan Lear argues when discussing the Crow nations (Lear 2006). As mentioned at the end of section 4 of article 4, to counter this argument one would need to appeal to a more robust and universally shared form of rational self-reflection such as that advocated by Christine Korsgaard (1996).

¹¹ It also seems rather unlikely that people like Mr Doom actually exist. So even if one rejects the idea that autonomy requires a basic shared grasp of the world, one could still reply that my defence of MOC may fail in principle, but in practice it does not matter – people such as Mr Doom, who genuinely claim that they can only see animals as tools even after honest reflection, simply do not exist.

¹² To be more precise: in article 4 I claimed that the thesis that ordinary conceptions of animals are of moral relevance because of their role in autonomous action is compatible with MI, and MOC is concerned with a broader claim as it involves also the role of ordinary conceptions in self-examination.

individuals whereas the former concerns other aspects of our moral life, namely autonomy and self-examination.¹³ And if these two are compatible how does a moral individualist that accepts MOC differ from one that rejects it?

To show why MOC and MI are compatible and what accepting both amounts to it will be helpful to recall the definition of MI which according to Rachels is that MI is a

thesis about the justification of judgements concerning how individuals may be treated. The basic idea is that how an individual may be treated is to be determined, not by considering his group membership, but by considering his own particular characteristics.¹⁴ (Rachels, 1990; 173)

Moral individualism is, then, a thesis that concerns the justification of judgment, that is it concerns *justificatory reasons*.¹⁵ Since MOC concerns explanatory reasons and does not require us to assume that ordinary conception provide us with justificatory reasons, MOC and MI are compatible: they concern different aspects of our moral life.

An agent that is committed to both theses will be someone who appreciates the relevance that ordinary conceptions play in her self-understanding and her autonomy. At the same time, she would hold that such ordinary conceptions cannot by themselves provide her a guide to understand whether her treatment of animals is justified. What does this mean though? In what way would her understanding

¹³ At first glance one might think that MOC and moral individualism aren't compatible because the first highlights an agent's first-person's perspective and the latter an impartial standpoint that requires us to treat every animal as equal. Such a worry would rise because the most renowned moral individualist are part of what I have dubbed "the orthodoxy in animal ethics" (introduction; article 2; article 5). These authors advocate for a conception of the agent as an impersonal being committed to view the world from the point of view of the universe (see article 5, section 3.1), a conception of the other animals as beings possessing morally relevant characteristics (see article 5, section 3.2) and an exclusive interested in one form of moral thinking, moral judgment (see article 5, section 4). By doing advocates of the orthodoxy exclude from the realm of what is morally significance everything that concerns the idiosyncratic dimension of the moral agent, thereby rendering MOC at best uninteresting form them. However, even though all members of the orthodoxy are moral individualist, not all individualists need necessary side with the orthodoxy: one could still be a moral individualist and accept that ordinary conceptions of animals play a crucial role in practical reason.

¹⁴ I am using the term "characteristics", "capacities" and "properties" interchangeably even though it is true, as Grimm and Monsó have noticed that one can interpret the term "characteristic" as being much more far reaching than the term capacities: for these authors, also relational properties should be included among the characteristic of an animal (2019). Others like Todd May (2014) and the advocates of the orthodoxy in animal ethics understand "characteristics" as "capacities" or as "intrinsic properties" and provide therefore a narrower understanding of it (see also introduction, section 2). I will follow May and treat MI only as a thesis about an individual's capacities such as the capacity for sentience, or for consciousness.

¹⁵ I am working under the assumption that we should interpret "justification of judgment concerning how individuals may be treated" as referring to the same justificatory reasons that I have been referring to throughout the dissertation (see article 2 and article 4): that is, justificatory reasons of the moral kind. The kind of reasons that we claim being reasons that count in favour of the morality of an action. So, I am assuming that moral individualism is a thesis that does not concern practical reasons in general but only a specific set of reasons: those that an agent can appeal to when trying to assess whether their action is morally justified.

of human-animal interaction differ from what it would have been had she endorsed only moral individualism?

To discuss this let us go back to Jessica with her three rabbits. And let's presume that Jessica has been persuaded by MI. Moreover, for the sake of the argument, let's assume that among the various instances of moral individualist Jessica has been persuaded by Regan's rights approach: the three rabbits are conceived as subjects-of-a-life in virtue of the specific morally relevant capacities¹⁶ that they share and whose inherent value ought to be respected in virtue of the principle of respect (Regan 2004).

Jessica will now endorse the idea that despite encountering the three rabbits under different ordinary conceptions, they all share the morally relevant properties that make them subjects-of-a-life. So on the one hand she recognises that it will make sense for her to treat them according to the ways she conceive of them in her everyday life: caring for Roger, giving him drugs and checking his cortisol level will makes sense to her because she thinks of herself as a veterinarian, feeding Bugs and playing with him and her daughter on the carpet will make sense to her because she thinks of herself as a caring mother; and getting rid of the pest will make sense to her because she thinks of herself as a gardener and the rabbit's appetite threatens the integrity of her garden. On the other she would recognise that these conceptions do not immediately justify her to act accordingly, but that justification would require an appeal to the rabbit's capacities (as well as an appeal to the principle of respect).

To determine whether she is justified in treating the rabbits in ways that already make sense to her she will have to assess which of these conceptions are compatible with viewing the rabbits as subjects-of-a-life. In other words, Jessica will need to understand whether it is possible to treat Bugs at the same time as her daughter's pet and with the respect due to a subject-of-a-life. To do so she will need to assess whether the former way of treating Bugs is compatible with the latter. The conception of a subject-of-a-life will therefore function as a standard to determine the permissibility of an ordinary conception. And such a standard can function both as an external and internal standard: Jessica's commitment to treat the three rabbits as subjects-of-a-life would provide her with an external standard in the sense that she would determine whether a practice is *tout court* acceptable. If, a particular practice makes it impossible to treat an animal as a subject-of-a-life then engaging in such practice would be impermissible. For example, if conceiving of animals as livestock, pests or research tools

¹⁶ The capacities being the capacity of having "beliefs and desires; perception, memory and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference and welfare interests; a psychophysical unity over time and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them" (Regan 2004, 244).

makes it impossible to respect their inherent value than these practices would not be justified and should be abandoned.

Secondly, Jessica's commitment to MI will also provide her with internal standards for specific practices. If, for the sake of argument, we concede that the practice of pet keeping could, in general, be carried out in accordance with the principle of respect, then the animal's status as a subject-of-a-life would require certain conditions. There would be more or less acceptable ways for Jessica to treat Bugs as a pet: she could still play with him, but she would need to respect his choice to engage or not; she would have to provide him with comfortable housing, and so on. The same reasoning could apply to animals regarded as pests: Jessica might still describe the rabbit as a pest because he damages her vegetable beds, but she should look for ways of responding that respect the principle of consideration – for example, by making the garden less accessible.

These considerations do not really depart from the approach of an orthodox moral individualist, though. Not much seems to have changed: we think about animals in different ways but some of these ways ought to be rejected. So, what does MOC bring to the table that differs from a usual moral individualist approach? There are two main contributions that MOC can provide (which I have already anticipated in article 4).

4.1 From the ordinary to the abstract and back

The first contribution concerns the necessity for the agent to engage with ordinary conceptions in the moment in which she acts. MOC states that ordinary conceptions of animals are *necessary* for an agent's autonomy because, when acting, an agent does so in the wake of the understanding that she already has of herself. Such an understanding in turn is partially but necessarily supported by the way in which an agent understands the world (see article 4). In other words, in order to act autonomously an agent needs to understand, at least partially the world in which they are acting, and such an understanding is built throughout an individual's personal life and history. If Jessica spent her whole life by conceiving of rabbits only as pets, patients and pests then it is through these conceptions that she will make sense of them.

MI is a thesis that requires the agent to choose a particular conception of the animal, e.g., as subject-of-a-life and to adopt a particular conception of herself, e.g., as an impartial agent (more on the latter in the section 4.2). These ways of conceiving animals are not, however, embedded in practices, nor are they conceptions that one grows up with: they are philosophical artifacts that one can engage in while reading books and in philosophical and political discussion. Regarding this aspect Cora

Diamond was right, we don't *encounter* abstract animals, we encounter pets, companions and livestock (see Diamond 1978; article 4).¹⁷

Since for MOC it is necessary for an agent to act in accordance with ordinary conceptions that they already hold, to act autonomously the agent will need to both act by conceiving of animals through ordinary conceptions and through the conceptions of moral individualism. Even after having endorsed MI, it would not be possible for an agent to act purely as a rational being and drop all conceptions that they already had of themselves. Nor would it be possible to treat other animals purely as beings with morally relevant properties.¹⁸ After having been persuaded by Regan's argument Jessica will still be Jessica and will keep encountering the three rabbits in real life. Jessica then starts by conceiving Bugs as a pet, reflects on what it would mean to treat him as a subject-of-a-life and then either goes back to treating him as a pet – but with a different attention to his needs. Alternatively, she might, realise that the practice of pet keeping involve a particular self-understanding, that of being an owner, and an understanding of Bugs as something she owns, which in turn leads her to violate the respect principle. In this case Jessica will need to find other ways to treat Bugs, e.g., as a companion.

This has the implication that agents like Mr. Doom who might not have ordinary conceptions compatible with conceiving of an animal as a subject-of-a-life, instead of reading *The Case for Animal Rights* would need to engage in different practices with other animals. This means that the moral individualist that wishes to persuade the hunter who struggles to see animals as beings deserving moral consideration will waste her time if the hunter does not have ordinary conceptions to, so to speak, go back to. It would be like telling a meat eater who only knows meat-based recipes that they shouldn't eat meat without providing them with further culinary inspiration.¹⁹

4.2 Understanding yourself as an impartial agent

The second aspect highlighted by MOC is an existential one. MOC allows us to appreciate the importance played by an agent's self-understanding when trying to figure out how to act.

MOC is a thesis that highlights the relationship between reasons and an agent's self-conception. And, as I already argued in section 4 of article 4, MOC requires justificatory reasons to be also explanatory for the agent if she is to act autonomously on them. This means that the agent who endorses moral

¹⁷ To be more precise: one could argue that the conceptions employed by MI are ordinary conceptions as they are conceptions used in the practice of philosophical discourse. I am limiting "ordinary conceptions" to the conceptions that we form of the other animals in the practices that involve real animals.

¹⁸ As a matter of fact, it seems both practically and conceptually impossible to treat an animal *only* as a subject-of-a-life.

¹⁹ It should be noticed that, despite being a moral individualist, Singer seems to have noticed this problem and added vegan recipes at the end of *Animal Liberation Now!* (2023)

individualism, needs to be able to take the fact that an animal has a particular morally relevant property not only as a justificatory reason but also as a reason upon which it would make sense for her to act given the conception that she has of herself (see article 4). She must be able to see herself as a moral individualist. Jessica must be able to make sense of the idea of herself treating the three different rabbits as equals. She needs to be able to conceive of herself as someone who is responsive to the norms generated by a commitment to MI: an impartial agent.

To restate this point, it is helpful to imagine Jessica before and after having endorsed MI. Imagine that Jessica had yet to embrace moral individualism and that she is already used to think of the three rabbits as her daughter's pet, her patient and a pest in virtue of her self-conceptions respectively as mother, veterinarian and gardener. As soon as she reflects on the idea that the three rabbits are subjects-of-a-life and endorses the idea that she ought to treat them equally, she will need to conceive of herself as someone for whom it makes sense to treat the three rabbits equally.²⁰ Jessica needs to imagine herself as an impartial being for whom these reasons truly have more weight than other reasons stemming from the fact that she cares more about Bugs than about the pest. She needs to be able to make sense of the idea that the reasons stemming from her commitment to treat all subjects-of-a-life equally have more weight than those reasons stemming from the relations and practices constituting her everyday life.

MOC shows that MI doesn't provide us only with a moral task but with an existential one.²¹ It requires us to endorse a particular understanding of ourselves and to become a certain kind of person: deciding that something counts as a moral justification isn't just an act that allows us to judge an action, it shows the commitment to the kind of person that we understand ourselves to be and endorse.²² This has three implications, two of which I already discussed in the articles that constitute this dissertation and another which I have yet to discuss.

The first implication is that, as discussed in article 4, changing one's mind shouldn't just be characterised as an adoption of rational norms, but rather as a shift on our self-understanding. This means that if a moral individualist is trying to convince someone of the truth of their thesis, they are

²⁰ De Lazari-Radek and Singer make a similar point when discussing the point of view that the utilitarian ought to take. And argue that when taking an impartial standpoint, we should be viewing things as if we were looking at them from the point of view of the universe (lit). The difference here is that they did not highlight the relevance that taking this point of view has on a person's self-conception and its overall role in practical reason.

²¹ Korsgaard's overall project of identifying our practical identity as the source of moral obligations follows quite a similar route (see e.g., 1996; 2009) and would be compatible with these considerations (see also Velleman 2009; Katsafanas 2019).

²² It could be also noticed that moral individualism requires Jessica to come to terms with her animality. Accepting moral individualism does not only mean for her to accept that she is a rational being that is responsive to a certain kind of reason; it also comes with the recognition that we and all other animals share some morally relevant characteristics. Discussing this however would lead us to much of topic.

not just asking them to be rational but also to understand themselves through the light of a particular self-conception. And eventually to give up some aspects of their identity. In fact, if an agent's self-conception clashes with that of an impartial and rational agent, they would be required to abandon a certain understanding of themselves in favour of another one. MI might require giving up an understanding of ourselves and thereby threaten aspects that give meaning to our lives. If Mr. Doom's life revolves around his identity as a hunter – in terms of the friendships he has built and the structure this role gives to his daily life – then accepting MI would require him to give up that identity and, in a very real sense, become another person (see article 4).

The second implication concerns the fact that the process of recognising the moral significance of the other animals might be hindered by our self-conceptions. Moral theories that accord direct moral significance to the other animals share the assumption that animals are beings with their own interests and that these are independent from the practices in which we involved them in. An animal's ends are not limited by those ends that we impose on them. And as argued in article 5 and 6, we might struggle to see that, we might "project" on the animal our own phantasies and preoccupations. We can fail to recognise that animals aren't just here for our own purposes because we might be driven by anxiety like Miguel (see article 5), by other psychological resistances we have in accepting the reality or extent of animal suffering (see article 6) or merely by self-interest. We might fail to see that they are not mere means. MOC then provides the conceptual tools to make sense of our struggle to see animals as they really are, and in article 5 and 6 I have suggested that the method to tackle this issue isn't just a matter of engaging in rational argumentation as the orthodox moral individualist suggest, but rather to engage in self-examination.

The third implication is that the moral agent might face competing reasons. If an agent's self-conception – like that of Mr Doom – is deeply rooted in practices that involve needless animal suffering but also give meaning to his life, he will have reasons that favour continuing those practices. That is, he will have reasons that count in favour of an action in virtue of the fact that they provide meaning to his life. In fact, Mr Doom might even recognise that what he is doing is wrong. That is, he might accept that moral individualism is correct yet still consider the demands of moral theory excessive. Some authors have argued that moral demands lack the authority to require us to give up aspects of life that provide meaning (e.g. article 7; Williams 1971; Wolf 1982). These authors claim that when there is a clash between morality and other practical considerations it is not clear why justificatory reasons of the moral kind should be stronger than other justificatory reasons (of the non-

moral kind).²³ I do not aim to solve this issue here; instead, I want to point out that MOC allows moral individualism to explain why we feel the pull to treat unequally equal individuals: because such inequality may be the source that gives meaning to both ourselves and our world.

Conclusions

In this dissertation I showed that ordinary conceptions of animals are of moral relevance because of their role in practical reason. I did so first, by illustrating how our ways of conceiving of animals can both lead us to engage in and preclude us from specific language game, and provide us with specific reasons for action (article 1). Then by showing that even though some might understand these reasons as justificatory reasons (article 2) one should be careful to do so because of the danger of ceding ground to moral relativism or to indulge into the unreflective reproduction of the status quo (article 3; article 4; concluding discussion). Instead, I argued that we should understand ordinary conceptions as providing us with explanatory reasons which allow the agent to make sense of her own actions as her own (article 4). This in turn allowed me to clarify that ordinary conceptions are of relevance because, by providing us with explanatory reasons, they are necessary for us to interact autonomously with other animals (article 4) and because they allow us to engage in self-examination (article 5).

When highlighting and discussing the relevance of self-examination as a form of moral thinking I have both showed that engaging with it allows us to navigate instances of moral disagreement (article 5), understand the motivations underlying weak arguments posed by conservatives (article 6) and illustrate in what way moral demands can pose a threat on an agent's integrity (article 7).

I have argued that self-examination has been overlooked by the orthodox approaches to moral individualism – e.g., by utilitarian and right's theories – because of their scant interest in the subjective and idiosyncratic dimension of the agent (article 5). However, even though this dissertation developed an approach that highlights aspects overlooked by orthodox moral individualists, as I have shown in this final discussion, its findings are still compatible with the moral individualist thesis. As a matter of fact, by clarifying precisely in what way we should understand the reasons that ordinary conceptions provide us, I have put forward a “modular” thesis, in the sense that, similarly to moral

²³ In article 4 I distinguish between justificatory reasons that provide us with moral reasons and justificatory reasons that might appeal to prudential, egoistic, aesthetic or other sorts of practical reasons. I have used the term “justificatory reasons” in the moral sense throughout this whole dissertation. Now I am referring to justificatory reasons of the non-moral kind: I might have egoistic reasons to eat meat because I like it but moral reasons against eating it. The question on whether moral reasons should be stronger of non-moral ones is up to debate.

The fact that I am taking now about reasons that count in favour of an action because they are meaningful might be confusing because it might seem that I am referring to “explanatory reasons.” “Explanatory reasons” and “justificatory reasons” only refer to a reasons *function*, however. In one case they explain the action and in another they justify it. When one justifies one's actions they might do so on moral ground or on other grounds. Among the latter is the principle of acting in a way that makes sense to yourself.

individualism, it is compatible with a variety of normative theories (see Delon 2015).²⁴ These normative theories might not just be concerned with clarifying problems involving the other animals, however. In fact, even though MOC addresses the problem of the ways in which we conceive of animals in our everyday life, the same arguments could be applied when discussing the ways in which we conceive of humans in our everyday life: we encounter humans as bus drivers, sexual objects, doctors, and enemies, and in virtue of these encounters, we have reasons to treat them in certain ways (see also Velleman 2009). Indeed, even though MOC was elaborated to address a problem in animal ethics, its scope is not necessarily limited to this area of moral inquiry. Its potential can be explored by conducting further research in “human ethics” and applied in contexts such as medical ethics, just war theory, and, more broadly, issues of social justice.

Regarding animal ethics specifically, it is easy plausible to foresee that MOC might be welcome by anti-theoretical approaches to animal ethics who have tackled its problems with a focus on moral psychology (see e.g., Gruen 2015; Aaltola 2018). However, even orthodox approaches to animal ethics could integrate it. In fact, if on the one hand MOC might be of interest for the former because self-examination can be understood as valuable for its own sake (and the same could be said for autonomy), on the other more orthodox approaches to animal ethics might appreciate MOC’s instrumental value: understanding the relation between ordinary conceptions of animals and an agent’s identity, might be for the consequentialist, relevant to adjust the aim in their persuasion tactics: it is not just about asking people to do the right thing, but as well to understand how to persuade people to see themselves differently and endorse that conception. And the same would go for self-examination: we need to overcome our biases in order to see the animals as they really are and thereby implement what moral theory demands of us.²⁵

In a way MOC, provides a middle ground and a bridge between the Wittgensteinian approaches and the more theory-driven moral individualists whose main aim is to determine the right treatment of the other animals. By framing the problem as a problem in practical reason that has also psychological and existential implications it builds a bridge between the former, and their attention to our moral life and the latter, focused on following the demands of moral theories. It shows that any revolution (or

²⁴ Clare Palmer’s work on the distinction between the duties owed to wild and domestic animals is similar in this regard (see Palmer 2010, 4). The difference lies in the fact that Palmer is interested in further specifying the sort of obligations that we have towards the other animals, whereas I am interested in expanding our scope of inquiry beyond the realm of moral obligation.

²⁵ Nonetheless even though such an instrumental approach to self-knowledge is already widely accepted (see e.g., Meyers 1989; O’Hagan 2012; Roessler 2015), I think it should be treated with caution. For one examining oneself with the ulterior motive of overcoming one’s bias *in order to do what is right* seems to have its own bias about what the right course of action should be and therefore to what kind of aspects of oneself one should, so to speak, get rid of and “deal with” (for other criticisms about the instrumental use of self-knowledge see Mackenzie 2018).

reform) in our treatment of other animals necessarily requires a corresponding revolution (or reform) in how we think about ourselves.

In any case, I do not take MOC as a *solution* to the problem of the differential treatment of similar animals but rather as a thesis that helps to illuminate a particular aspect of our moral life. It does so by joining the ranks of all the work done by authors who have tackled the problem from other perspectives, for example by addressing our tendency to favour some animals over others by articulating duties more flexibly attuned to relationships and contexts (May 2014, Palmer 2010; Abbate 2023; Sebo 2023; Fisher, Palmer and Kasperbauer 2023) or by highlighting the importance that emotions play in our moral life (Gruen 2015; Aaltola 2018; Acampora 2023). My work followed a different level of analysis, delving deeper into this proclivity and exploring forms of moral thinking that mainstream animal ethics has often overlooked and tries to translate the problem posed by Diamond – about the risk of moral individualists to undermining our moral concepts (1978; 1988) – in terms of a problem that each particular agent faces when dealing with the task of understanding who they are in front of the other animals. Ultimately this task comes with the risk of undermining the conception that agent have of themselves. Mr. Doom will likely need to undermine his understanding as a hunter if he is to take the problem of animal suffering seriously.

This dissertation began with an epigraph from Korsgaard, which states: “Thinking about the other animals, and how we are related to them, and whether we may kill them, eat them, or experiment on them, takes us right into the existential heart of philosophy.” (Korsgaard 2018, 5). Indeed, MOC reflects on one strand of the complex texture of the life we share with other animals and reveals the existential and psychological difficulties that we face in our interactions with them. MOC shows us that reflecting on the ways our conceptions of other animals are intertwined with our self-conception allows us to uncover the difficulties that come when confronting the chimeric aspect of other animals: our fellow creatures are not merely encountered as pure subjects with their own lives and ends, but as patchworks of meaning bearing the burden of our need to make sense of the world and ourselves.

References

- Aaltola, Elisa. 2018. *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Abbate, Cheryl. 2023. “People and Their Animal Companions: Navigating Moral Constraints in a Harmful, Yet Meaningful World.” *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1231–54
- Acampora, Ralph R. 2023. “The Affective Turn in Animal Ethics.” *Rel.: Beyond Anthropocentrism* 11: 9.

- Deininger, Konstantin, Andreas Aigner, and Herwig Grimm. 2022. "Resisting Moral Conservatism with Difficulties of Reality: A Wittgensteinian-Diamondian Approach to Animal Ethics." *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 1–19. doi:10.1007/s10790-022-09908-3.
- de Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna, and Peter Singer. 2014. *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Diamond, Cora. 1988. "Losing Your Concepts." *Ethics* 98 (2): 255–277.
- . 1982. "Anything but Argument?" *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1): 23–41.
- . 1997. "Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions." In *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, edited by L. Alanen, S. Heinämaa, and T. Wallgren. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- . 2001. "Injustice and Animals." In *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, 118–148. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 2003. "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1 (2): 1–26. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0090>
- . *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fischer, Bob, Clare Palmer, and Thomas J. Kasperbauer. 2023. "Hybrid Theories, Psychological Plausibility, and the Human/Animal Divide." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (4): 1105–1123.
- Gaita, Raimond. 2004. *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*. London: Routledge
- Gardner, Sebastian. 1993. *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gruen, Lori. 2015. *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Hagan, Emer. 2012. "Self-Knowledge and Moral Stupidity." *Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy*.
- Hermann, Julia. 2015. *On Moral Certainty, Justification and Practice, A Wittgensteinian Perspective*. England, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781137447180.
- Katsafanas, Paul. 2013. "Philosophical Psychology as a Basis for Ethics." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44 (2): 297–314.
- Killmister, Suzy. 2013. "Autonomy and False Beliefs." *Philosophical Studies* 164 (2): 513–31.
- Korsgaard, Christine. M. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Lear, Jonathan. 2006. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacKenzie, Jordan. 2018. "Knowing Yourself and Being Worth Knowing." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4 (2): 243–61.
- May, Todd. 2014. "Moral Individualism, Moral Relationalism, and Obligations to Non-Human Animals." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31 (2): 155–168.
- McMahan, Jeff. 2005. "Our Fellow Creatures." *Journal of Ethics* 9: 353–380.
- Meyers, Diana T. 1989. *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Monsó, Susanna, and Herwig Grimm. 2019. "An Alternative to the Orthodoxy in Animal Ethics? Limits and Merits of the Wittgensteinian Critique of Moral Individualism." *Animals* 9: 1057.
- O'Neill, Onora. 1986. "The Public Use of Reason." *Political Theory* 14 (4): 523–551.
- Palmer, Clare. 2010. *Animal Ethics in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Parfit, Derek, and John Broome. 1997. "Reasons and Motivation." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 71: 99–146.
- Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . *On What Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phillips, D. Z. 1992. "What Can We Expect From Ethics?" In *Interventions in Ethics*, Swansea Studies in Philosophy. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11539-6_7.
- Pleasants, Nigel. 2006. "Nonsense on Stilts? Wittgenstein, Ethics, and the Lives of Animals." *Inquiry* 49: 314–336.
- . 2009. "Wittgenstein and Basic Moral Certainty." *Philosophia* 37 (4): 669. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-009-9198-0>.
- . 2008. "Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty." *Inquiry* 51 (3): 241–67. doi:10.1080/00201740802120673.
- Pugh, Jonathan. 2020. *Autonomy, Rationality, and Contemporary Bioethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198858584.001.0001>
- Rachels, James. 1990. *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*. Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Regan, Tom. 2004. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Roessler, Beate. 2015. "Autonomy, Self-Knowledge, and Oppression." In *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression: Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Marina Oshana, 68–84. New York: Routledge.

- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2007. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* London: Routledge.
- Scanlon, Thomas M. 2014. *Being Realistic About Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Velleman, David, J. 2009. *How We Get Along*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. "Internal and External Reasons." In *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winther, Hannah and Bjørn Myskja. 2023. "Fish as Fellow Creatures—A Matter of Moral Attention." *European Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1): 274–85. doi:10.1111/ejop.12920