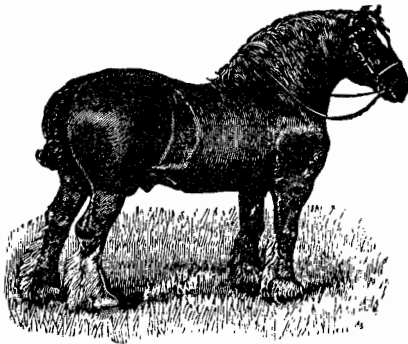


# Species, Individuals, and Domestication

A commentary on Jane Duran's "Domesticated and Then Some"

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## I: Introduction

In the second paragraph of "Domesticated and Then Some," Professor Duran characterizes her topic as "the question of the moral significance, from the standpoint of animal rights, of whether or not a species is domesticated." Her question, so stated, is crucially ambiguous. Is it

Q<sub>1</sub>) What can be said about the moral significance of an *individual animal* in virtue of its being a member of a domesticated species or breed rather than a wild species or subspecies?<sup>1</sup>

Or is it

Q<sub>2</sub>) What moral significance do domesticated *species or breeds* have in virtue of their being domesticated rather than wild?

Duran's reference to "the standpoint of animal rights" in her topic sentence suggests that she is concerned with the former question, since, as she later admits, the animal rights literature is singularly individualistic.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Duran asserts that she and Tom

Regan (the foremost animal rights theorist, and an adamantly individualistic one)

...are not, presumably, addressing the same issue. I may wholeheartedly agree that the treatment of the Rhode Island Reds used for egg-laying and meat consumption purposes is inhumane, and I may even become a vegetarian. But this is not the same thing as evincing a concern for the preservation of the Rhode Island Red as a breed, in comparison, say, to the Leghorn...

This apparent attempt to distance herself from the individualistic stance of the animal rights movement suggests that she intends to address question Q<sub>2</sub> rather than Q<sub>1</sub>.

These two questions presumably are related, since showing that a wild species like the turkey vulture is more morally significant than a domesticated breed of turkey presumably would give us a reason to prefer killing an individual turkey in deference to a turkey vulture, if it came to that. However, the two questions are importantly distinct conceptually, and an argument which supports a certain answer to one may not simultaneously support an analogous answer to the other.

Duran argues by comparing domesticated and wild animals in various ways and concludes that domesticated animals "compare favorably" with wild animals, meaning that, based on the comparisons she considers, domesticated animals are as or more morally significant than their wild cousins. In what follows, I consider each of her comparisons, clarifying the relevance of each comparison to questions Q<sub>1</sub> and Q<sub>2</sub>. The upshot of my discussion is that while Duran's comparisons support a certain answer to question Q<sub>1</sub>, they do not support an analogous answer to question Q<sub>2</sub>. Specifically, Duran's comparisons support answer A<sub>1</sub> to question Q<sub>1</sub>:

A<sub>1</sub>) *Individual animals* have greater moral significance in virtue of their being



## DISCUSSION

members of a domesticated species or breed rather than a wild species or subspecies,

without at the same time supporting answer A<sub>2</sub> to question Q<sub>2</sub>:

- A<sub>2</sub>) Domesticated *species or breeds* have greater moral significance than *wild species or subspecies*.

## II: Duran's Comparisons

**First comparison.** Duran begins by observing that "many breeds [of domesticated animals] are ill-equipped for survival without human help."<sup>3</sup> This comparison would favor wild over domesticated individuals as well as wild over domesticated species (since, as Duran points out, some individual animals have been bred to have maladapted musculatures which endanger both the *individual* and the breed, whereas others have become "shy breeders," which endangers the *breed*, but not necessarily the individual), but Duran later dismisses this comparison as morally irrelevant. She writes: "The fact that a breed is ill-equipped for survival without human intervention...does not immediately seem to be a morally relevant difference".

**Second comparison.** Duran then claims that "insofar as the characteristics having to do with putative moral significance are concerned, domesticated breeds are at least on a par with other animals." And she points out, in support of her claim, that "Domesticated creatures are, after all, sentient, just as the majority of non-domesticated creatures [are]..." Later in the paper Duran considers a related comparison, namely that "Some breeds... seem simply to be more sensitive" than their wild counterparts to pain and/or emotional distress. Note, however, that since only individual animals are sentient, these comparisons suggest only that wild and domesticated *individuals* "compare favorably," not that domesticated *breeds* are on a par with wild *species*.

**Third comparison.** Duran next observes that since "[domesticated animals'] reversion to type is only a speeded-up version of the general genetic change taking place in all living beings," insofar as this is of any moral significance, it suggests that "domesticated animals [are] more or less on a par with non-domesticated animals." Since evolutionary changes do not occur within a single lifetime—since "reversion to type" cannot occur in a single generation—the reference of "they" in this comparison must be species and breeds

rather than individuals. And so this comparison, if relevant, would suggest that domesticated breeds are on a par, morally, with wild species.

Notice, however, that Duran never claims that a breed's or a species' being subject to genetic evolution is of any moral significance. And without an argument for that conclusion, it is difficult to see why it should be (especially if, like Duran, we have explicitly rejected as morally irrelevant the fact that domesticated breeds are ill-equipped for survival without human help).<sup>4</sup> If the comparison is *not* of any significance, however, then it provides no reason for thinking that domesticated breeds are on a par with wild species. So at this point in her paper, Duran has given us no reason for thinking that domesticated breeds are even on a par, morally, with wild species, and she has given us only one reason for thinking that domesticated individuals are more morally significant than wild individuals.

**Fourth comparison.** After discussing the relevance of Rachels' moral individualism to our treatment of exceptional individuals, Duran introduces another comparison which, she believes, favors domesticated animals: she claims that many or most of them are "exceptional" or "gifted" members of their species. Here again, Duran does not explicitly claim that this comparison is morally relevant. She writes that "domesticated animals are not typical of their species, and if this...is relevant to their moral standing...[then] it probably speaks in their favor..." (emphasis altered). But let us grant that the comparison is significant. Clearly, the phrase "typical of their species" cannot be interpreted as referring to species, and the sense of the phrase is strained by interpreting it as referring to breeds. The sense pretty clearly is this: "the *individual* domesticated animals that make up a breed are not typical *members* of their species." Only individuals can be atypical representatives of their species. So even if we suppose that Duran has now given us a second reason for thinking that domesticated individuals are more morally significant than wild individuals, she still has not provided us with any reason for thinking that domesticated *breeds* are on a par with wild *species*.

**Fifth comparison.** Duran next discusses the significance of the fact that domesticated breeds have acquired the special traits they have because human breeders valued those traits. At first glance this seems to be a comparison of domesticated and wild *individuals*, since it is at the level of individuals that genetic "traits" are expressed. Earlier in the paper,

however, Duran alludes to the fact that "human-created breeds...have contributed the most to the course of human history and culture." Since no Shire horse alive today has contributed to human history, this seems pretty clearly to be a reference to domesticated breeds rather than individuals. So perhaps Duran's fifth comparison is best construed as a comparison between domesticated individuals and/or breeds to wild individuals and/or species. As such, it represents the only reason Duran offers for thinking that domesticated breeds (as opposed to individuals) "compare favorably" with wild species (as opposed to individuals).

But Duran is herself skeptical of the moral relevance of this comparison. She writes: "The fact that a breed...contributed greatly to the development of human culture, does not immediately seem to be a morally relevant difference." Moreover, it is unclear how much weight she would be willing to place on it even if it were admitted as relevant. She begins the paragraph in question by writing:

One might be inclined to note that the traits which these animals have are, of course, traits specifically desired by humans, but...one could move with that assertion in either direction.

Here Duran seems uncertain whether or not to be embarrassed by appearing to base concern for domesticated animals on anthropocentric reasoning, for the passage continues:

Surely the fact that a German short-haired pointer puppy may begin spontaneously to point at an early age does not count against the value of pointers as such, since pointing is merely an exaggeration of traits which most dogs possess.

This reference to "the value of pointers as such" suggests that Duran wants, if at all possible, to find inherent value in domesticated animals, rather than relying on their instrumental value to humans. The next sentence of the paragraph similarly suggests that she would be unwilling to place much weight on her fifth comparison even if it were admitted as morally relevant.

**Sixth comparison.** Here, Duran strikes off in an altogether different direction with a remark that

becomes her sixth comparison. She writes: "the counterargument that naturally occurring untouched species are members of the original primeval environment and hence deserve special consideration *is strong*" (emphasis added). Thus, she suggests that even if her fifth comparison were admitted as morally relevant, this sixth comparison, which clearly favors wild species and/or individuals over domesticated breeds and/or individuals, would outweigh it.

### III: Evaluating Duran's Conclusion

Duran offers no other comparisons for consideration. In light of what I have said, then, what Duran has done in her paper comes to the following:

Concerning question Q<sub>1</sub>, she has offered three reasons for thinking that individual domesticated animals are more morally significant than individual wild animals. Specifically, she has argued that

- A) they often are more acutely sensitive to pain and/or to emotional distress (comparison #2),
- B) they often are "exceptional" or "gifted" members of their species (comparison #4), and
- C) they often are valued by human beings for historical and cultural reasons (comparison #5).

Although she appears to admit that (C), if morally relevant, is outweighed by the fact that individual members of wild species are "members of the original primeval environment," reasons (A) and (B) do, if accepted, support her contention that, on the whole, domesticated individuals are more morally significant than wild individuals. This is how Duran's argument supports answer A<sub>1</sub> to question Q<sub>1</sub>.

Concerning question Q<sub>2</sub>, Duran has offered only one comparison in support of answer A<sub>2</sub>, namely that domesticated breeds are more morally significant than wild species insofar as the former are of greater historical and cultural value than the latter. However, as I indicated earlier, Duran is herself skeptical of the relevance of this comparison, and she appears to think that it is outweighed by the fact that wild species are "members of the original primeval environment." So, rather than supporting answer A<sub>2</sub> to question Q<sub>2</sub>, Duran's analysis actually supports answer A<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>:

- A<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>) Wild species or subspecies have greater moral significance than domesticated species or breeds.

Duran's concluding paragraph is, therefore, misleadingly written. She writes:

In sum, I have argued that if we can accept a view of animal rights for non-domesticated species, there are probably no strong reasons for denying the rights to domesticated species, both when seen from the standpoint of the individual creatures involved, and when seen from the (more interesting, I believe) standpoint of breeds vs. species.

Duran fails clearly to distinguish question Q<sub>1</sub> from question Q<sub>2</sub>, and she therefore speaks as if, in arguing for a particular answer to the first question, she has simultaneously argued for an analogous answer to the second.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter I speak simply of wild "species" instead of "species or subspecies," and of domesticated "breeds" rather than "species or breeds." Also, in what follows I speak consistently of the relative "moral significance" of various entities. Duran speaks interchangeably of "moral significance" and "moral rights," but the two concepts are distinct from each other, and each is in turn distinct from the concept of bare moral considerability. On this point, see Kenneth Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978), pp. 311-12. To Goodpaster's analysis I would add only that, assuming that moral rights function to protect interests, having interests is a necessary condition for having rights, but not necessarily for being morally considerable. It may be that an object's being beautiful suffices to make it morally considerable. This, apparently, was G. E. Moore's view in *Principia Ethica*. For an application to endangered species (both wild and domesticated) see Lilly-Marlene Russow, "Why Do Species Matter?" *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981), pp. 101-12. Notice, however that Russow's argument does not show that endangered species and breeds themselves have aesthetic value, since, as she is careful to note, only the individual members of an endangered breed or species instantiate beauty.

<sup>2</sup> Here "individualistic" means "attributing direct moral significance only to individual organisms." This is the usual sense of the term in the literature of environmental ethics. Individualism in this sense is consistent with, but not equivalent to, the individualism which James Rachels advocates, and which Duran explicitly discusses in her paper.

<sup>3</sup> Duran appears to think that this difference marks the core of the conceptual distinction between a domesticated breed and a wild subspecies. However, "domesticated" means more than "no longer wild," and while the condition Duran cites probably is sufficient for saying that a species is no longer

wild, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for saying that it is domesticated. Probably the fact that a population would either perish or undergo radical change if human interaction with it were withdrawn is sufficient for saying that it is no longer wild. A species like the California condor is no longer wild, precisely because this is true of it. However, the California condor is not therefore domesticated. So the fact that a population would either perish or undergo radical change if human interaction with it were withdrawn is not sufficient for saying that it is domesticated. Neither is it necessary, however. For surely there are or have been *some* domesticated breeds (e.g., prospectors' burros) which would neither perish nor change radically upon reverting to a feral condition.

<sup>4</sup> In my "Biological Functions and Biological Interests" (forthcoming) I argue that every individual organism has interests in the fulfillment of the biological functions of its various component organs and subsystems, where biological functions are defined in terms of consequence selection of organs and subsystems in the individual's ancestors. My argument explains the relevance of an *individual organism's* being the product of evolution, without suggesting that evolving *species* have interests. The locus of what I call "biological interests" is the former, not the latter)

