

# The Case for Intervention in Nature on Behalf of Animals

## A Critical Review of the Main Arguments against Intervention<sup>1</sup>

**Mikel Torres**

*PhD Candidate, University of the Basque Country*

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gm\_hache@yahoo.es

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### ABSTRACT

*If we assume that all sentient animals deserve equal moral consideration and, therefore, that their interests are morally relevant, what should be our attitude regarding natural phenomena like predation or starvation which are harmful for many wild animals? Do we have the prima facie moral obligation to try to mitigate unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified animal suffering in nature? In this paper I assume two main theses: (1) Humans and (many) animals deserve equal moral consideration; this implies that (2) We have the prima facie moral obligation to try to mitigate unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified animal suffering. Based on these assumptions, I argue that we are morally obligated to aid animals in the wild whenever doing so would not originate as much or more suffering than it would prevent.*

*Keywords:* moral consideration of animals, wild animals, intervention in nature, predation, environmentalism, animal suffering, moral agency, special obligations, natural selection, argument from species overlap.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Do we have the *prima facie* moral obligation to try to mitigate unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified animal suffering? In this paper I will argue that we do and, additionally, that this moral obligation implies the duty of intervening in nature for the sake of the interests of individual wild animals, with the aim of sparing them the sufferings they would otherwise endure.

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I will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will present some theses which I will simply assume as a starting point. Secondly, I will present what I consider to be the eight main arguments against human intervention in nature with the aim of preventing the suffering of wild animals<sup>2</sup>, and I will argue that they do not work.

## 2. STARTING POINT ASSUMPTIONS

The main thesis I will assume affirms that many animals deserve certain kind of moral consideration and, at least all the sentient ones, are worthy of moral consideration in the same way that human beings are<sup>3</sup>.

In turn, this assumption is based on other assumptions. I believe that if we assume some basic moral principles like the “principle of equality” (all human beings are worthy of the same moral consideration), the “principle of relevance” (only if there is a morally relevant difference between the members of two groups can a difference in the entitlements of the members of those two groups be justified), and the “principle of desert” (nobody should be blamed or praised for things that are beyond their control), these principles offer us a good base to elaborate a sound argument in favor of the equal moral consideration of all sentient animals. I presuppose

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<sup>2</sup> There is another very important argument that has been raised against intervention in nature on behalf of animals: the argument from absurdity. The argument runs as follows (Sapontzis 1984, 27; 1987, 229): *First premise*. Moral agents are morally obligated to alleviate unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified animal suffering – *Second premise*. Animals suffer when they are preyed upon by predators – *First conclusion*. Moral agents are morally obligated to forestall predation – *Third premise*. But, clearly, a moral obligation to halt predation is absurd – *Second conclusion*. Therefore, contrary to the first conclusion, moral agents are not obligated to alleviate unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified animal suffering. Advocates of this argument are, for instance, Sagoff (1984, 41-2) and Cohen (2001, 30). The main problem of the argument is that the third premise is disputable. Since this argument has been impeccably analyzed by Sapontzis (1984; 1987, 229-48), I will not consider it in this paper. I agree with Sapontzis when he concludes that the obligation to intervene in nature on behalf of animals is not absurd when we adopt the following principle: Moral agents are morally obligated to forestall predation whenever doing so would not originate as much or more suffering than it would prevent.

<sup>3</sup> A being deserves moral consideration if legitimate moral constraints apply to our treatment of it. Moral consideration can be direct or indirect. On the one hand, a being deserves direct moral consideration if moral agents have the duty of taking into account the well-being of that creature when they take moral decisions. On the other hand, a being deserves indirect moral consideration if moral agents do not have the direct duty of taking into account its well-being, but must consider how the treatment of that being affects the well-being of the individuals who deserve direct moral consideration.

that these three basic moral principles are valid. Additionally, based on the argument from species overlap, I assume that there are no morally relevant differences between humans and animals <sup>4</sup>.

Of course, all these assumptions are debatable and, although I believe there are good arguments to support them, in this paper I will not try to argue in favor of them. I will just take them for granted.

### 3. EIGHT ARGUMENTS AGAINST INTERVENTION IN NATURE ON BEHALF OF ANIMALS

Unless there were independent reasons to deny equal moral consideration to wild animals, the previous assumptions apply to wild animals as well as to domesticated ones. The concession of equal moral consideration to sentient wild animals leads to the problem of the moral evaluation of predation <sup>5</sup>. Animals constantly kill other animals in wild environments. If we, as moral agents, have the moral obligation to regulate our own behavior towards animals, should not we have the obligation to regulate how animals treat each other also (Cowen 2003, 169)?

In what follows, I will defend that, in many cases, it is our duty to intervene in nature to regulate how animals treat each other. With this aim in mind, I propose one thesis and one moral principle <sup>6</sup>:

*The interventionist thesis:* Moral agents have the *prima facie* moral obligation of intervening in nature with the aim of protecting individual animals from unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified sufferings.

*The interventionist principle:* Moral agents are morally obligated to forestall predation whenever doing so would not originate as much or more suffering than it would prevent.

I will examine and criticize what I believe are the eight main arguments that have been presented against the interventionist thesis and the interventionist principle. I will conclude that all of them face significant problems and, therefore, that they are unsatisfactory.

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<sup>4</sup> For an illuminating justification of the equal moral consideration of humans and animals based on these basic moral principles see Rowlands 2002, 26-57; 2009, 8-30.

<sup>5</sup> Although throughout the paper I will refer mainly to the issue of predation, I am convinced that the conclusions drawn are valid regarding other problems such as starvation or natural catastrophes.

<sup>6</sup> The thesis and moral principle presented here are directly linked with the ideas of Sapontzis (1984; 1987, 229-39).

### 3.1. *The argument from bad consequences*

Singer (1973; [1975] 2002, 225-8)<sup>7</sup>, Rowlands (2009, 168-70) and Simmons (2009, 22-5) appeal to the argument from bad consequences to justify that we should leave wild animals alone. The main reasons they offer to refuse intervention are based on the disastrous consequences it would supposedly cause: starvation, overpopulation, the extinction of some animal and plant species, etc.

In spite of the fact that they base their arguments in different theoretical frameworks, we can summarize and simplify the argument they use as follows:

1. *First premise:* Actions are right in so far as they produce good consequences and wrong in so far as they bring about bad ones.
2. *Second premise:* Intervening in nature would cause bad consequences.
3. *Conclusion:* Therefore, intervening in nature is a morally wrong action.

The first thing we should note is that these authors do not show that intervention will necessarily have disastrous consequences; they simply take the truth of the second premise for granted. Perhaps it is a reasonable belief but some empirical data to support the assertion would be more than welcome. In any case, for the sake of the argument, I will accept that a widespread intervention in nature would have bad consequences. Does this invalidate the interventionist thesis? I do not think so. To put it simply, the interventionist principle escapes from the critique of the argument from bad consequences. If we have the duty to forestall predation only when doing so does not cause as much or more suffering than it would prevent, we do not have the duty to prevent predation in those cases in which intervention would have disastrous consequences. The interventionist principle avoids from the beginning the problems posed by the argument from bad consequences.

Someone might hold that the interventionist principle presents an empty obligation because there are no cases in which preventing predation would not originate as much or more suffering than it would prevent. Nevertheless, this is not the case (Sapontzis 1984, 31; 1987, 234). For instance, if we accepted the principle, we would have the obligation to impede that our pets become predators.

To sum up, the interventionist principle eludes the objections of the argument from bad consequences and, therefore, it offers us a good base to support the interventionist thesis.

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<sup>7</sup> To be fair, Singer (1973; [1975] 2002, 226) stands for a restricted interventionist position, provided that we were able to calculate reliably the general consequences of policing nature.

### 3.2. *The argument from the lack of agency*

Appealing to the fact that animals are not moral agents, Regan (1983, 357) explicitly denies that we should intervene in nature with the aim of preventing the rights violations that happen there. He claims that, since animals are not moral agents, they do not have moral duties. Hence, animals do not have the duty to respect the rights of other animals, including their right to life. This way, while human hunt would be immoral (because humans are normally moral agents), animal predation would not pose any moral problem (because animals are not moral agents). When there are no moral agents involved, there are no moral issues to deal with.

Why are similar harms morally significant in some cases but not in others? Regan's argument implicitly implies that only when an action is performed by a moral agent possesses that action moral weight. When there are no moral agents involved, consequences are neutral. The argument runs as follows:

1. *First premise:* Only when an action is performed by a moral agent does that action possess moral weight.
2. *Second premise:* Animals are not moral agents.
3. *Conclusion:* Therefore, predation between animals has no moral weight.

Regan's thesis that the harm animals cause each other is not morally significant because they are not moral agents is highly implausible. It requires that only when a moral agent consciously and deliberately decides to inflict harm is that harm morally significant. If the same harm was caused by a moral patient, since moral patients do not have the duty to respect other's rights, that harm would not be morally relevant. But this viewpoint is extremely counterintuitive. We all normally admit that an action performed by a moral patient can be morally wrong and, therefore, that actions made by moral patients are not always morally neutral. For instance, would we say that we should not intervene if a dog bit a human baby because neither is a moral agent and, therefore, because the consequences of the action are morally neutral? While the assumption that only moral agents can make morally significant choices is reasonable, the thesis that only when moral agents are involved are the consequences morally significant is hard to accept.

Apart from that, Regan's response to the predation problem is inappropriate for various other reasons. First of all, Regan's answer misses the point. Nobody is saying that animals have the moral duty to respect the rights of other animals. The point is to decide if we, moral agents, have the duty to intervene in nature to impede animals harming each other.

Therefore, to answer that animals are not moral agents and that, hence, there is no moral problem in predation is to refute a straw man. Of course, the attribution of moral agency to an individual is important to settle responsibility and punishment issues but it does not affect the rightness or wrongness of the harm itself (Sapontzis 1987, 231; Cowen 2003, 176-7; Nussbaum 2006, 379)<sup>8</sup>.

Leaving aside that Regan's answer misses the point, his position faces other considerable problems. Firstly, it is usually accepted that rights holders have the right to see their rights protected wherever the damage comes from. For example, we help people harmed by hurricanes and earthquakes, and we think they have the right to be assisted by the state, despite hurricanes and earthquakes not being moral agents. Secondly, Regan's thesis is openly against our everyday intuitions; should we refrain from intervening in all the cases in which neither attacker nor attacked were moral agents? Were that the case, we would not have the duty to intervene when a dog attacked a human baby. This conclusion is against common-sense intuitions. Thirdly, it seems to be a contradiction between the traits that, according to Regan, inherent value possesses and the normative thesis that recommends not intervening in nature. In Regan's (1983, 236-7) theory, individuals who possess inherent value possess it equally; inherent value does not admit varying degrees. Furthermore, inherent value is not gained or reduced depending on the actions that inherently valuable individuals perform. Therefore, if all individuals who possess inherent value deserve respectful treatment, and the principle of respect for individuals establishes that animals have the right to be assisted by moral agents whenever their rights are violated, then, how can Regan justify that humans do not have the duty to intervene in nature to prevent predation? To justify why some animals – domesticated animals, mainly – have the right to be assisted while others – wild animals – do not, we would need to postulate that inherent value and rights are context dependent. Unfortunately, Regan's theoretical commitments regarding inherent value do not allow him to support this thesis. This is not surprising: since individuals who possess inherent value possess it equally, and since inherent value is not gained or reduced depending on the actions that inherently valuable individuals perform or the degree to which they have utility with respect to the interests of others (Regan 1983, 237), it would be unacceptable to declare that inherent value changes depending on the context.

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<sup>8</sup> This thesis presupposes that together with agent-dependent dimensions like motives and emotions, there are also agent-independent reasons that we should take into account in our moral evaluations; e.g., the consequences of actions.

Briefly, Regan holds two opposing views. On the one hand, animals have the right to receive assistance from moral agents. On the other hand, moral agents should not intervene in nature to prevent rights violations between animals. Trying to fit together these two conflicting claims, Regan presents the argument from the lack of agency. Unfortunately, this argument is untenable.

### 3.3. *The argument from ignorance*

This is an argument formulated in passing by Simmons (2009, 23). Taking into account that we do not still know very well how ecological relations work, it would be dangerous and naïve to suppose that we have enough knowledge to modify natural ecological relations without causing serious problems. We are not able to predict accurately the effects that preventing predation would have for humans, animals and ecosystems. Nevertheless, we know that intervention would clearly modify ecological relations and, in all probability, due to our lack of adequate knowledge, it would also cause severe harms to animals. Thus, because of the insufficiency of our current expertise, we must refrain from preventing predation.

We should note first that this argument is only applicable against some forms of intervention, that is, interventions with considerable probabilities of triggering ecological catastrophes (Cowen 2003, 179). If we could measure reasonably well their consequences, modest interventions would be morally acceptable. In addition, although it seems that Simmons' argument implicitly assumes it, it is important to observe that not all human caused disturbances in nature are blameworthy (Cowen 2003, 180). Disturbing nature might be morally justified if the consequences were good enough. The argument from ignorance does not explain why ecological balance should always be the prevailing value. Furthermore, since change and instability are common phenomena in nature, it is not clear how we should define an ecological catastrophe (Cowen 2003, 180). Finally, our lack of knowledge and the possibility of a natural disaster does not necessarily imply that we should not intervene in nature more than it implies that we should (Cowen 2003, 181). After all, uncertainty affects equally the interventionist and the anti-interventionist theses; it neither supports nor opposes intervention as such. If we are not able to predict accurately the effects that intervention in nature would have, we are probably not able to predict the consequences of not intervening either. Were this correct, the argument from ignorance could be based on the "*status quo bias*", an inappropriate and irrational preference for an option because it preserves the *status quo* (Bostrom and Ord 2006, 658).

### 3.4. *The environmentalist argument*

Environmental ethics, unlike mainstream animal ethics theories, concedes direct moral consideration to natural entities which do not have the subjective capacity to suffer (Callicott 1980, 31-3). While the viewpoint of ecocentrism is holistic, animal ethics views are atomistic and, unlike animal ethics theories, environmental ethics does not rely on a hierarchical ontological and axiological scheme, it relies on a functional system of value (Callicott 1980, 38). Environmental ethics framework is holistic because its main focuses of concern are ecosystems, not individuals. Consequently, Callicott (1980, 39) claims that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, and it is wrong when it tends otherwise<sup>9</sup>. Environmental ethics relies on a functional system of value because it does not ascertain value distinctions based on a fixed higher/lower order of being. On the contrary, it ascertains value distinctions based on the contextual functional importance individuals have in preserving ecosystems. In this respect, a bacterium can deserve higher moral consideration than a dog if it contributes more to the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community.

In line with the ideas presented above, environmental ethics holds that the moral consideration of individual animals is contextually dependent (Callicott 1980, 47). Animals who make notable contributions to the preservation of ecosystems are worthy of higher moral consideration than those who do not. That being so, the moral consideration of an individual wild animal will depend on the contribution it makes to the preservation of the ecosystem. Therefore, we would only have the duty of helping a wild animal in need when doing so helped to preserve an ecosystem. If we acknowledged that intervention in nature to prevent predation would not contribute to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community, we would arrive at the conclusion that intervention is immoral. Moreover, due to the critically important role they play in preserving many ecosystems, we should concede higher moral consideration to predators than to prey (Callicott 1980, 39).

Portrayed in this way, the environmentalist argument is untenable. First of all, the extreme holistic moral standpoint Callicott defends is arbitrary (Sapontzis 1987, 261-4). It is perhaps acceptable that a fraction of an individual's value is determined by his role in an ecosystem. Perhaps it is even acceptable that, in some circumstances, the overall good of the ecosystem should prevail over the good of an individual and, therefore, the

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<sup>9</sup> As he openly recognizes, embracing this moral principle Callicott is directly following Aldo Leopold's land ethic (Leopold 1949).



good of the ecosystem is sometimes an adequate criterion to resolve conflicts of interests. But it is difficult to accept that the moral consideration of an individual is completely determined by the role she or he plays in an ecosystem. It is difficult to accept because it implies that it is legitimate to use some individuals as mere means to promote, in this case, the alleged integrity, stability and beauty of nature. More importantly, adopting the extreme individualism *vs.* radical holism dichotomous perspective, Callicott presents a false dilemma. There are tolerable intermediate positions and an interventionist animal ethics does not have any problem in embracing them. Additionally, Callicott defends environmental ethical holism because he believes it presents a viable way of adjudicating conflicts of interests. But this claim is valid also for many moral principles and it does not necessarily entail that the moral principle at issue is acceptable.

Callicott (1980, 53-5) believes that, due to its value commitments, animal ethics is a world-denying philosophy. We should accept nature and life as they are, with all their hardships and all their joys. This means that we should accept that in nature some beings live at the expense of others: “If nature as a whole is good, then pain and death are also good” (Callicott 1980, 54). We should not impose artificial human values on nature; just the opposite, we should assert natural biological laws. This proposal has practical consequences which are hard to endorse (Sapontzis 1987, 264). By way of illustration, when Callicott mentions we should accept life and nature as they are, he states that in the favored good old days when tribalism reigned “[...] animal flesh was respectfully consumed; a tolerance for pain was cultivated; virtue and magnanimity were prized; lithic, floral, and faunal spirits were worshipped; population was routinely optimized by sexual continence, abortion, infanticide, and stylized warfare” (Callicott 1980, 54). If the practical implications of Callicott’s stance are adoration of floral and faunal spirits, infanticide and stylized warfare, his argument is difficult to accept.

To conclude, we have good reasons to reject Callicott’s charge of animal ethics being a world-denying philosophy. If all moral theories which do not accept life and nature as they are should be labelled as “world-denying”, then, the vast majority of moral theories are world-denying. Some of the widely accepted main goals of morality are to inhibit natural desires and to propose and fight for a better world. The unconditional approval of the current state of affairs would only be morally correct if we lived in the best of the possible worlds. As I am afraid (and hope) that this is not the case, to be anti-natural and world-denying is not immoral; quite on the contrary, morality requires a positive world changing attitude (Sapontzis 1987, 267-8). Thus, ultimately, I conclude that we have good reasons to reject the environmentalist objection against the interventionist thesis.

### 3.5. *The argument from natural selection*

Predation is one of the reasonable candidates to be listed as a disvalue in nature (Rolston 1992, 253-5). Predation is indisputably bad for prey: it makes them suffer and, in many cases, the final result is death. Nevertheless, disvalue for prey is a value to predators. From the general perspective of ecosystems and evolution, there is not so much a loss of value in predation as value transference: a life is lost to make possible the survival of other. Even at the level of subjective experiences, Rolston thinks predation is well-adjusted: the pains of prey are counterbalanced by the pleasures of predators. At this point, Rolston takes under consideration the negative consequences that preventing predation would probably have: “An Earth with only herbivores and no omnivores or carnivores would be impoverished” (1992, 254). Since he believes that biological goodness, the degree to which ecosystems are pro-life and prolific, is a relevant aspect to evaluate natural processes, he concludes that the impoverishment that preventing predation would cause is not desirable. It is important to emphasize that preventing predation could impoverish not only ecosystems but the capacities of animals too. The tendency to complexity predation promotes is not only beneficial to predators, prey also gain in the process by acquiring more complex and higher capabilities by means of evolution. Hence, although predation is a disvalue for individual prey, it can be valuable for prey species because it promotes the development of better perceptual, physical and cognitive skills in the long-term. Eradicating the weakest members of a species, natural selection promotes the fitness of the individual members of a species in the long-run. When we adopt a standpoint based on the long-term benefits of natural selection, the disvalue of predation is transformed into value.

Rolston (1992, 252) acknowledges that biological goodness *per se* is not necessarily morally valuable. Diversity, complexity, fortitude through struggle, etc., are simply natural creative activities, not moral ones. However, we may have good reasons to see them as morally important, especially if we do not exclusively tie moral value to the subjective psychological experiences of individuals. Insofar as biological complexity is the necessary precondition of the subjective psychological experiences to which we attach value, we should value and protect it too (Rolston 1992, 275). Thus value is not only tied to subjective psychological experiences such as pleasure or pain but it is also tied to biological processes like predation.

The main problem with the argument from natural selection is that it inappropriately mixes up two different issues: the welfare of individual animals and the general capacities of a species. As is perfectly clear in the

human case, the policies and traits that maximize the well-being of individuals are not necessarily the ones that maximize the improvement, diffusion and reproduction of their genetic material. Natural selection and individual welfare are distinct issues. Since I consider sentience to be a necessary and sufficient condition to deserve full and equal moral consideration, forasmuch as species are not sentient beings I think morality should focus primarily on the welfare of individuals and not on the improvement of the capacities of a species. The improvement of biological fitness and the survival capacities of a species can be morally important indeed, but it should play a minor role in morality compared with individual welfare. Despite this, at least in some cases, prey may actually benefit from the existence of predators: predators may keep down overpopulation, improving the quality of life of prey (Cowen 2003, 172-3). However, even in those cases it is clear that predatory activities are not always beneficial to some prey. Finally, it is relevant to emphasize that generally, due to the harsh practical consequences it would have, we would not accept the argument from natural selection when applied to humans. Perhaps continuously fighting to survive would be good for us as a species, maybe it would improve our capacities in the long-term but, nevertheless, mainstream moral theories tend to promote compassion and empathy towards the weakest, not insensitivity and repudiation. This is somewhat positive, I believe. The argument from species overlap is helpful here. If all humans deserve the same moral consideration, and if animals deserve the same moral consideration as marginal humans, then, if we consider the argument from natural selection unacceptable when applied to marginal humans, we should consider it unacceptable in the case of animals too.

I conclude that, because of the aforementioned problems, the argument from natural selection is problematic and we should not endorse it.

### 3.6. *The argument from different moral obligations*

DeGrazia (1996, 274-8), Scruton (2000, 79-122), Simmons (2009, 22), and Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 156-209) hold that, due to the personal or historical relations we have with domesticated animals, we have positive moral duties of care towards them that we do not have towards wild ones. So, due to the special relationships we have with them, we owe positive special obligations of care to some subset of animals, in contrast to the negative obligations we owe to all animals insofar as they are sentient beings. Therefore, although we have the duty to protect domesticated animals from the attacks of predators, we do not have the duty to protect

prey from predators in the wild, because we do not have positive special obligations of care in the second case<sup>10</sup>. The right to be protected from predators is a right acquired by domesticated animals through some type of special relationship with moral agents. Since wild animals do not normally have special relations with moral agents, they do not have the right to be protected from the attacks of predators. The main premise of the argument from different moral obligations says that special relations create and imply special moral duties.

I think that to determine the moral consideration of animals we should focus mainly in some morally relevant capacities of the individuals, not so much on the relations those individuals have with moral agents. Consequently, I think it is extremely problematic to ascribe moral consideration based mainly on relations instead of individual capacities. In any case, the main problem of the argument is that the argument from species overlap applies equally to individual capacities and relationships. Hence, for every affective relation X which we consider morally relevant to determine moral consideration, we will find some humans as well as some animals which do not have that relationship with moral agents<sup>11</sup>. This would implausibly imply that these humans and animals deserve lower moral consideration than those who have special relationships with us. Special relations perhaps ground special duties of care but they do not diminish the moral consideration of beings which do not have those relationships with us. Animals with similar morally relevant basic individual capacities should merit similar moral consideration, regardless of the relations they have with moral agents. Moral consideration derives mainly from capacities, not relations.

In principle, I agree to the idea that we have special moral obligations towards domestic animals as the result of the specific particular/historical relationships we have with them. What I find harder to consent to is the idea that we do not have the moral obligation to intervene in nature because we do not have special particular or historical relationships with wild animals. It is likely that we owe more to those animals closer to us but this does not mean we owe nothing to wild animals. The key issue here is if we consider our obligation to intervene, and duties of assistance in general, as common universal moral obligations or, on the contrary, as particular

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<sup>10</sup> To be fair, many of these authors claim that, in some particular and well-defined situations, we have the duty to prevent predation in the wild as well, but they maintain that, on the whole, we do not have the duty to intervene in nature on behalf of wild animals.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the argument from species overlap is not applicable in the case of historical relations but, obviously, the moral importance of historical relations and the duties they allegedly impose is controversial.

special obligations. In the case of human beings, we would probably reject that we only have the moral obligation to assist those humans who have a special relationship with us. It is doubtful that we must consider the right to be assisted when harmed by predators a relational right in the human case. Why should this be different in the case of animals? Were that the case, we would not have the obligation to help human victims of predation if they did not have a special relationship with us. Perhaps we do not have the duty to assist people or animals in those circumstances but, considering the counterintuitive severe practical consequences the denial of these duties would have, I assume the ball is in the court of those who deny the existence of universal duties of assistance<sup>12</sup>.

### 3.7. *The argument from naturalness or “nothing wrong”*

From time to time, an author appeals to the naturalness of predation to conclude that, inasmuch as predation is a natural phenomenon, there can be nothing wrong with it. Hettinger (1994, 17-8), for instance, says that intervening in nature to prevent predation implies a betrayal of natural values and abhorrence of natural processes. Predators are carnivorous; when they predate they are simply following their nature so it is nonsensical to claim that predation is morally wrong. They are predators, it cannot be wrong for them to predate. Therefore, when we disapprove of predation, we are opposing nature. To embrace natural values and value positively natural processes, we should accept that animal predation is good (but we could still consider human predation morally unjustifiable) (Hettinger 1994, 18).

In the first place, it is important to admit that it is by no mean easy to determine what is natural and what is not. In our current world, humans permanently interact with nature, affecting and altering it. For example, when humans introduce animals from a certain species into an ecosystem where no animal of that species used to live before, should we define the predatory activity of that species as natural? It is not clear. On the one

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<sup>12</sup> Ebert and Machan (2012, 154-5) outline a promising libertarian conception of animal rights that would imply that we would not have the duty to assist animals by means of preventing predation. They reject that moral rights are necessarily positive and negative and they claim that, if animals had only negative rights, then, we would not have the moral obligation to assist them when harmed by predation. According to them, each moral agent should assume duties of assistance depending on his particular feelings/beliefs. Although I find this libertarian conception of animal rights interesting, it is still underdeveloped and, therefore, I will set it aside in this paper.

hand, if we defined natural phenomena as those processes completely unconditioned by human influence, the predatory activity of invasive species introduced by humans would be unnatural and, therefore, immoral in consonance with the argument. On the other hand, if we accepted that human influence does not disqualify a process from being natural, the opponents of intervention should offer us a sound argument of why intervention would be immoral despite it being natural.

Besides, as Fink (2005, 4-5) notes, the argument is based on the general moral principle that if some animals are by nature carnivorous, nothing wrong happens when those animals kill others for food. So the argument takes for granted that to live following the dictates of nature is good but, undoubtedly, this principle is questionable. There is no logical connection between natural behaviors and morally correct ones: natural acts can be immoral and moral acts can be unnatural (Fink 2005, 5). Additionally, the argument from naturalness seems to presuppose that we should value positively all and every aspect of nature, but this thesis is implausible. As Everett (2001, 55-62) remarks, the negative evaluation of the suffering caused by predation does not mean necessarily the rejection of natural values and processes. We can see certain aspects of nature as morally bad without completely condemning or repudiating it. Moreover, it is reasonable to consider the compassionate human response towards prey and the desire to help them as natural as well (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 166). Finally, we should note that it is not the same to claim that predators are acting immorally and to claim that predation is immoral. If we accept that there are agent independent reasons which can make an action good or bad, then we are capable of defending at the same time that predators are not acting immorally and that predation is morally wrong. Therefore, it is not nonsensical to defend that predation is wrong.

Taking into account all these considerations, I conclude that the supposed naturalness of an action is difficult to define and, more importantly, it is irrelevant when trying to determine if an action is morally right or wrong. Therefore, the argument from naturalness is unsound.

### 3.8. *The argument from virtue*

Based on virtue ethics, Hursthouse (2011, 131-3) considers intervention in nature on behalf of animals immoral. She backs up her argument appealing to the virtue of respectful love.

Hursthouse (2011, 131) claims that the virtue of compassion is a specific form of the virtue of love. Since the primary concern of love is the

good or well-being of others, and in view of the fact that freedom from suffering is the central concern of compassion and a key element of the good or well-being of any sentient creature, compassion must be seen as a particular form of the virtue of love. In any case, she emphasizes that the virtue of love needs to be tempered with the virtue of respect, resulting in the virtue of respectful love (Hursthouse 2011, 132). Respectful love honors the right that others have to make their own choices, even in the cases in which we judge that their choices are harmful for their own good or well-being. Respectful love is, in the end, a corrective to the vice of arrogant paternalism. Our respectful love for animals should be based on, and informed by, “our recognition of the ways in which their needs and their lives are their *own*, peculiar to the sorts of animals they are” (Hursthouse 2011, 132).

According to Hursthouse (2011, 133), the virtue of respectful love is helpful to understand why intervention in nature on behalf of animals is immoral. The interventionist thesis is a morally inappropriate conclusion deduced by theory-driven philosophers. Due to their commitment to some abstract, general and basic moral principles, these philosophers have no choice but to accept the interventionist thesis when it is deduced from those principles. But virtue ethics rejects the idea that morality is reducible to a set of abstract, general and basic moral principles which should be applied every time we try to solve a particular practical moral problem. Virtue ethics makes us think about the rights and wrongs of our treatment of animals in terms of virtues and vices, not in terms of some abstract basic moral principles. Based on these premises, Hursthouse holds that, from the perspective of virtue ethics, the interventionist thesis is just a manifestation of anthropocentric arrogance, an obvious example of unjustified paternalism. When applied to wild animals, respectful love implies that we must respect the good that really is their own. Hursthouse acknowledges that the lives of the majority of wild animals are red in tooth and claw, but she concludes that respectful love demands leaving wild animals to live their own form of life, even if that form of life is harmful for them. If we intervened in nature on behalf of animals, we would destroy their habitats and their own forms of life, something completely incompatible with respectful love.

As I see it, the main problems of the argument from virtue are clear. First of all, the argument is acceptable only if it is assumed the theoretical framework of virtue ethics. In the second place, even if we assumed a virtue ethics standpoint, it would not be as clear as Hursthouse thinks that we should repudiate the interventionist thesis. The vicious nature of the thesis is up for discussion. After all, virtue ethics has to face three common objections (Rowlands 2009, 100-1): (1) *Subjectivity*: one’s person virtue is

another person's vice, and *vice versa*; (2) *Vagueness*: the implications of the application of a virtue in a particular case are imprecise and uncertain; and (3) *Conflicts*: there can be unsolvable and paralyzing conflicts between virtues. Of course, these problems do not disqualify virtue ethics as an adequate and stimulating approach to moral problems, but we must bear in mind that, many times, virtue-based theories come to different and even irreconcilable conclusions. This is not bad in itself, but it makes the vicious character of the interventionist thesis doubtful. For instance, we could argue that the interventionist principle is what the virtue of compassion requires in many circumstances, not an example of arrogant paternalism. Finally, I think the argument from species overlap is helpful once again. We would all probably consider virtuous helping a marginal human if he was attacked by a predator so, at least in principle, we should consider virtuous assisting animals in the wild as well.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have assumed that sentient animals deserve the same (or at least similar) moral consideration as humans. Afterwards, I have argued that the eight main arguments against the interventionist thesis are questionable, concluding that there are no good arguments to reject our duty of intervening in nature to avoid unnecessary, avoidable and unjustified animal suffering (whenever doing so would not originate as much or more suffering than it would prevent). Accordingly, if the previous arguments are correct, a good theory of animal ethics must be one which openly embraces the interventionist thesis and the interventionist principle.

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