

Naturalness, Wild Animal Suffering, and Palmer on Laissez-Faire

“Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do. It is our choice what happens from here.”

Mark Lynas, *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans* 2011

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“We just do not have duties to assist wild animals.”

Clare Palmer, *Animal Ethics in Context*, 2010

“The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease.”

Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden*, 1995

Tension between

Concern about massive human
influence on earth

(Environmental Ethics)



- Mark Sagoff once argued that in spite of a common opposition to anthropocentrism, animal advocates could not be environmentalists and vice versa
 - Animal advocates—if consistent—would advocate policies to reduce wild animal suffering that would compromise the authenticity, integrity, and wildness of natural systems, that is, their naturalness (a key environmental value)

*“Animal
Liberation and
Environmental
Ethics: Bad
Marriage,
Quick
Divorce” 1984*

Concern for Suffering of Wild
Animals

(Animal Ethics)



Conflict real, fundamental, ongoing: Not strawman

Because species in nature do not enjoy “cooperative and mutually supportive relations” need a “a gradual supplanting of the natural with the just”



Martha Nussbaum,
Frontiers of Justice, 2006

“We have reason to desire . . . arranging the gradual extinction of carnivorous species . . . [or intervening] genetically, so that currently carnivorous species would gradually evolve into herbivorous ones”



Jeff McMahan. *The Meat Eaters* 2010

“Concern for nonhuman animals entails that we should try to intervene in nature to reduce the enormous amount of harm they suffer”



Oscar Horta, *Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes* 2010

The Anthropocene's planetary management ethic drastically increases the conflict between respect of independent nature (=RIN) and goal of alleviating wild animal suffering

- Shall we manage biosphere for well-being of sentient beings, including wild animals?
- One futurist public intellectual thinks yes, arguing for a
 - “Compassionately run global ecosystem” in which “every cubic meter of the planet will be computationally accessible to surveillance, micromanagement and control” with the goal of creating
 - A “pan-species welfare state” by
 - “Reprogramming predator species” (a la McMahan) and
 - Using genetic engineering and nanotechnology to replace the pain motivational system with “heritable gradients of bliss”



David Pearce, *The Hedonistic Imperative* 2015

Tension not just about future possibilities, but current policies as well

- Animal advocates and environmentalists likely disagree about
 - Birth control versus predator restoration as response to overpopulation
 - Rescue of injured/sick animals versus letting nature take its course
 - “The reason Jesus came to earth was to keep nature from taking its course”
 - Paul Harvey criticizing National Park’s policy that prohibited the rescue of a buffalo stuck in ice
 - Relocation and/or captive breeding of endangered species
 - Eradication of human-introduced non-native species



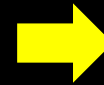
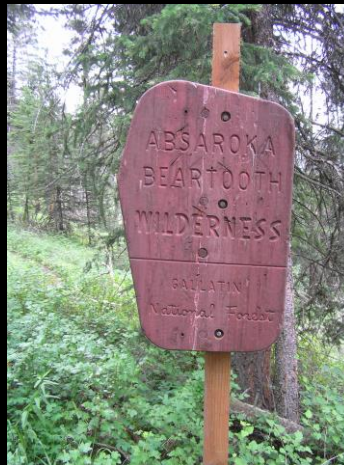
Paper compares the naturalness defense of non-intervention in nature with Clare Palmer's defense

- Environmentalists and animal advocates are diverse
 - Focus on environmental value of naturalness = Respect for independent nature (RIN)
 - Focus on Clare Palmer's animal ethics
 - A highly sophisticated and insightful defense of duties toward animals
 - Contrasts obligations to cultural animals and wild animals
 - Duties of assistance to cultural animals, laissez-faire for wild animals
- Compare Palmer's defense of laissez-faire with naturalness defense
 - Policy of leaving wild animals alone



What is naturalness?

- Extent to which entity not influenced by humans
- Type of negative causal relation between humans and nonhumans
- Degrees of naturalness



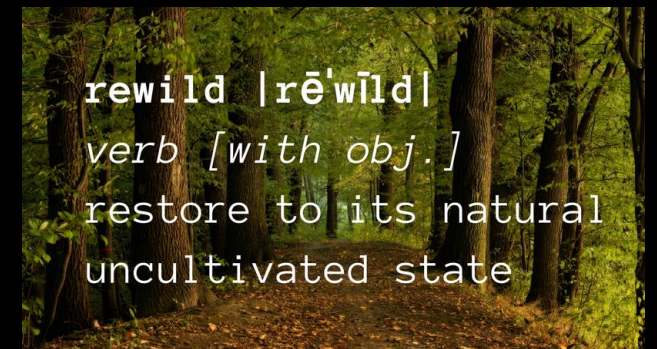
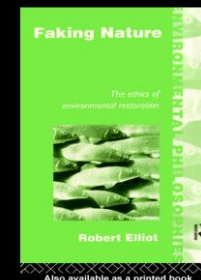
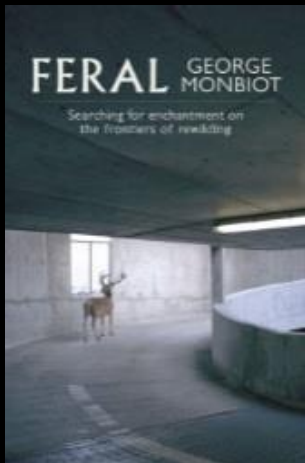
- Wolves more natural than dogs
- Vaginal delivery more natural than a C-section

Naturalness an overall judgment of degree of independence/autonomy from humanity

- Important to not put too much emphasis on intentional influence or influence involving management or control
- Human impact that is unintentional, unmanaged, or uncontrolled can be greater
 - Arguable that unintentional climate change has a greater influence on nature than would intentional climate engineering involving painting the roofs of buildings white
 - Unintentionally driving a species extinct arguably has a greater human impact on nature than intentionally managing the remaining population to avoid annihilating it

Naturalness not invariant historical property but ongoing and recoverable state of human independence

- Naturalness, once lost or diminished, can be regained
 - Human influence can **washout** overtime, like boot prints in the spring snow
 - Humanization embodied by old mining roads will eventually recede and natural forces regain relative strength
 - Nature can rewild on its own or sometimes with our help
 - Seemingly paradoxically, degrees of naturalness can return as a result of additional human activity
 - As when we pick up trash, remove a dam, or restore a species or ecosystem
 - Sometimes lack of additional human intervention can shackle a natural system with ongoing human-induced trauma
 - Reject Robert Elliott's idea restoration is Faking Nature
 - Reject Eric Katz's idea restoration is "The Big Lie"



But aren't humans a part of nature?

Does a focus on human-independent nature involve harmful human/nature dichotomy and ignore humans part of nature?

- Equally important to realizing that humans are a part of--and apart from—nature
- Crucial to realize that we evolved on planet like other biological beings and are subject, like them, to its natural processes
- Also crucial to realize that we have moral responsibilities and are hugely shaped by social, political, economic, technical factors
 - Failing to separate understanding of humans from understanding of nonhumans is tantamount to insisting social sciences be reduced to natural sciences
 - Such failure leads to absurdities like arguments for roadbuilding in wilderness areas “because we are part of nature too”

“We are animals ourselves . . . very precocious to be sure, but just big monkeys, nevertheless. We are therefore a part of nature, not set apart from it. Chicago is no less a phenomenon of nature than is the Great Barrier Reef.”



Baird Callicott , “La Nature est morte, vive la nature ” 1992,).

Why value naturalness?

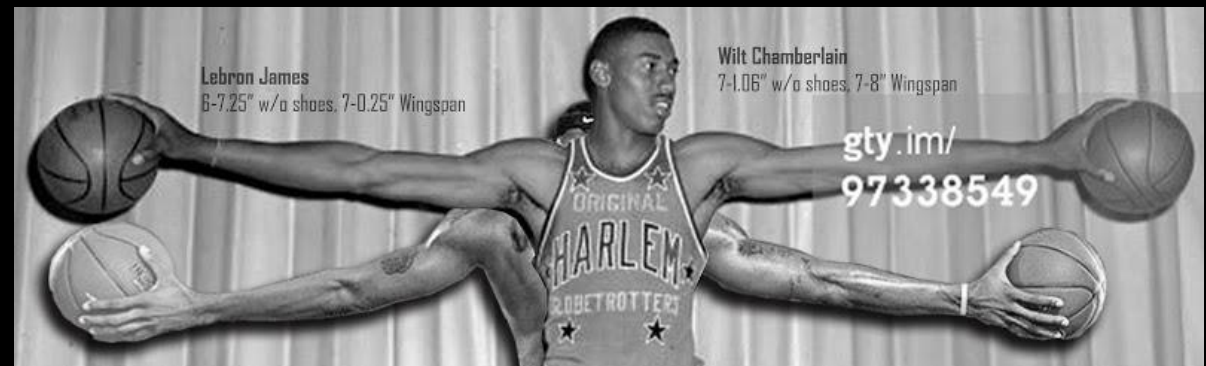
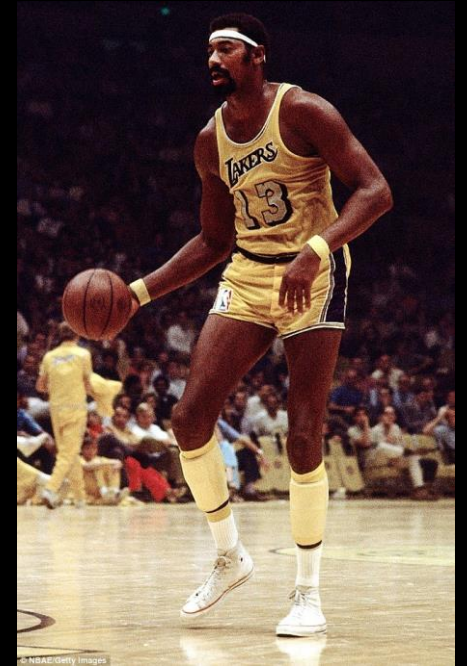
- Many do value naturalness in a variety of circumstances

Explains why Old Faithful loses its magic when the Park regulates it with baking soda



Or consider differential evaluation of natural death versus murder
Or attitudes toward fake birds/lawns and plastic trees

Admiration of athletic performance based in part on appreciation of native ability



We should value naturalness

- Value of naturalness is contextual
 - Initial acts of humanization by Pleistocene humans little/no loss of value
 - But with today's massive human alteration of the planet continuing to accelerate unabated, value of relatively untouched nature is acute
- Need for limits
 - To the human enterprise
 - To our freedom to act on and control the world
 - To our responsibility for the way things are



Imagine a world of near total human creation

Where humans

- Determine the weather: when spring comes, when it rains, whether sunny/cloudy, direction/speed of wind, how much snow
 - Decide which species exist, where, and in what concentration
 - Plant every tree
 - Shape every river, mountain, valley, glacier, and ocean current
 - Replace natural beauty with landscaped aesthetics
 - Engineer in detail the characteristics of our children
-
- A world with human fingerprints everywhere and omnipresent responsibility is seriously degraded
 - Only a narcissistic species would appreciate such a world of human overreaching
 - We should not be masters of the earth
 - We are already on this path and in many ways have already gone too far



Valuing naturalness shows respect for independent nature

- Humans should share the earth with others



- Should respect autonomy and independence of nonhuman other

- Respect its authenticity and integrity

- Doing so embraces humility



Limits to value of naturalness

- Naturalness is typically a value enhancing property
 - Although it does not guarantee that an entity possessing it is good all things considered
- While naturalness is an increasingly important and powerful value in this age of massive human impact on earth
- Naturalness can be overridden by other important values, including alleviating animal suffering

Animal suffering versus naturalness

- Experiential states of animals in nature are morally relevant
 - Reject claim suffering in nature neither good, nor bad: It is clearly intrinsically bad
 - This badness itself provides a **reason** to consider alleviating/preventing it
- So tension exists between respect for independent nature and moral concern for preventable wild animal suffering
 - These two values/moral reasons need to be weighed against each other
- Naturalness defense of laissez-faire
 - Preserving naturalness typically outweighs avoiding animal suffering
 - Especially when considering large-scale, remaking of nature in image of compassionate welfare biology (e.g., widespread birth control for predator & prey)
 - Small scale individual acts that alleviate suffering and cause little loss of naturalness are advisable (E.g., shooting dying & suffering elk)

Clare Palmer's no-entanglement defense of laissez-faire



- Palmer 's animal ethic constructed (in part) to support laissez-faire: No duty to rescue animals from fate in nature
- Moral difference between failing to assist and harming
 - “One is peculiarly responsible for what one does, in a way one is not for what one fails to prevent” (2010)
- Duty not to harm all sentient beings, duty to assist only if “entangled”
 - We are typically not entangled with wild animals



Palmer on entanglement

- Entanglements generating positive duties to assist come from
 - Agreements (lifeguard)
 - Creation of vulnerability or dependence (feed our dogs)
 - Harm requiring reparations (Your car hits squirrel)
 - Benefitting from an injustice (even if you did not cause it)
 - “Development” destroys deer habitat and now starving deer eating in your garden
 - Road kill: we all benefit from car culture that leads to this harm
 - Sharing attitudes whose existence supports and explains disadvantage
 - A person finds kittens in dumpster shares responsibility (thinks pet institution unproblematic & accepts pet trade)
 - A health vegetarian who is indifferent to animal pain/death shares responsibility for factory farming
- Explains: Why we have a duty to assist unrelated humans (starving children overseas) and cultural animals (drowning pets), but not animals in nature (drowning wildebeests)
 - We are entangled with other humans and cultural animals and this generates obligations to assist (e.g., a drowning child/dog)
 - We are not entangled with wild animals and so have no duty to assist drowning wildebeests

“This altitudinal climate creates situation where although only some are directly responsible for harm to individual animals, many others create the world in which harms are institutionalized, encouraged, or tolerated”
(Palmer, 2010)



Problem

Doesn't massive human impact on nature mean even wild animals entangled with human society?

Palmer is well aware of this problem

“What counts, in a time of globally pervasive human influence, as a ‘truly wild’ animal, and a ‘morally relevant entanglement’? Wildlife management, human development of animal habitat, anthropogenic fires, and so on, have affected many wild animal’s lives; and anthropogenic climate change is already impacting many wild animals’ habitats. Do more diffuse anthropogenic phenomena such as climate change create special obligations to assist wild animals?’ (2015, 208)

- **Many humans have benefited from harmful impacts on wild animals and share in the pro-development, business-as-usual attitudes that indirectly contribute to these harms**

Gives an overly sanguine response:

Yes most (wild?) animals entangled

“Accepting that anthropogenic environmental change does create special obligations to animals does not undermine the contextual argument; it just means that now *most* sentient animals have been drawn into relations with humans that generate special obligations, just as human societies now have entanglements that draw in virtually all people. This makes the position more demanding; but then, its objection to a requirement for humane wild intervention was not based on the over-demandingness of the requirement” (2015, italics added)

Is Palmer abandoning laissez-faire and joining pro-interventionist, human responsibility for nature camp?

- Reasons for assistance differ
- Details of assistance differ
- Extent of responsibility differs
- But like the “welfare biologists, Palmer seems here committed to substantial intervention on behalf of wild animals
- Like Anthropocene boosters, Palmer appears committed to significant human responsibility for nature
 - We now have responsibilities concerning the majority of sentient wild animals on earth
- If wild animals have become entangled with human society
 - As have distant humans and cultural animals
- Might we not need welfare programs for wild animals?
 - Analogous to those for humans and culturally-embedded animals
 - Such as medical and food assistance; birth control



Supplemental feeding of elk in National Elk Refuge

Palmer's responses limiting widespread assistance

- Impact on wild animals less than impact than on cultural animals, so our obligations will be less extensive
 - “Any special obligations flowing from climate change are likely to be weaker than those flowing from (say) deliberate selective breeding for dependence” (2015)
- When impact unknowable or un-rectifiable, no obligations
 - “The impacts of climate change on animals are harder to identify, less intentional and certainly less predictable than selective breeding. . . Over time, more vulnerable animals will shift geographical location (if they can) or else disappear . . . And finally there is no point offering assistance that is ineffective; given the degree of climate change to which we are now committed, there will be some cases where assistance would not constitute a benefit over time” (2015)
 - Problem of relying on temporary contingent facts:
 - As our knowledge and technology grows, this argument for laissez-faire weakens
 - More and more, we will be able to determine our impacts and rectify them
- Much of our impact on wild animals is not harmful and is even beneficial; it might even be beneficial overall.
 - “But there's deep uncertainty here. We can't tell if climate change will cause more suffering to non-humans than it will relieve” (2011, 290)
 - Non-harmful impacts on wild animals are entanglements compatible with laissez-faire as don't require interventions for restitution

Naturalness defense of laissez-faire compared with non-entanglement justification

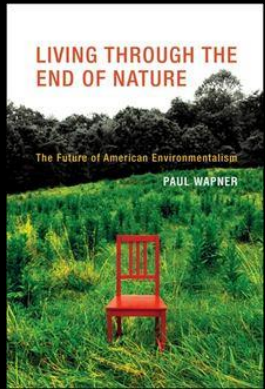
- First, an objection: End of Nature

- Respect for independent nature can't justify non-interference as there is no autonomous nature left to respect
- In Anthropocene, "man" has influenced all of earthen nature (via climate change, global pollution, etc.)

- Anthropocene concept

- Important in highlighting and having us take seriously the harmful human impacts on earth
- Dangerous when, instead of encouraging us to step back, it promotes the alleged inevitability of human management and responsibility for nature on earth

"We are poised at an important time in human and Earth history. For the first time, we . . . are changing the way the entire planet functions. This is an amazing opportunity—humanity has now made the leap to an entirely new level of planetary importance. As Stewart Brand said in 1968: "We are as gods and might as well get good at it."



Erle Ellis, 2011

Naturalness remains & more important than ever

- The supposed end of nature
 - Egregious exaggeration of extent of human influence
 - Manifests an anthropocentric narcissism blind to ongoing agency of nature
- Relative rarity of naturalness only increases its value
- RIN continues as a crucial value guiding our relation to nature today
- For example: Even though anthropogenic climate change has increased interbreeding between grizzly and polar bears
 - This doesn't imply no naturalness left to respect in our treatment of them
 - Relocating Polar Bears to Antarctica would still be significantly unnatural and count as a reason against it



Harm and rectifying harmful intervention

No-entanglement view

- Do not harm wild animals based on general duty not to harm others
- After harm, entanglement requires moving away from laissez-faire, for justice requires reparations
- Must rectify harms even if moves us further from naturalness
- Example:
 - If anthropogenic disease causes suffering in an animal population, favor capture and insertion of chemical releasing implant in the population



Naturalness view

- Do not harm wild animals as this reduces naturalness
- After harm, naturalness retains the laissez-faire presumption
- Counts against rectifying harms if this further decreases naturalness
- Oppose implant as additional loss of naturalness value



Permissible assistance and reasons to assist

No-entanglement view

- Assistance permissible, but no obligation
- Wild suffering provides no reason to assist
 - One implication is that . . . we have no reason to try to reduce overall suffering in nature by managing or shaping nature differently, trying to find ways to reduce predation, disease and the harshness of wild conditions . . . This seems to me to be a helpful implication (2015, underline added)
- In individual encounter with suffering, assistance is “perhaps desirable,” although the “weak reasons for approving assistance” based on concern for character of agent (that they not be unsympathetic or insensitive) rather than direct concern for suffering of animal
- “You could walk on by and . . . you would have done nothing wrong” (2010) (though you could be criticized for being insensitive)

RIN: Naturalness view

- Assistance prima facie impermissible
- Can allow that wild suffering provides a direct reason to assist, not necessarily a weak reason, but one typically overridden especially in large scale interventions to prevent animal suffering
- In individual encounter with wild suffering where little naturalness at state, RIN advocate can say one ought to assist and would be wrong not to



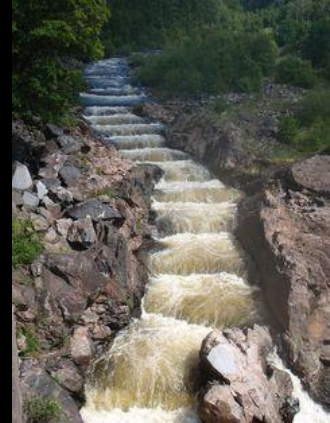
RIN not totally non-interventionist

- Favors restoration/rewilding when such human intervention increases naturalness
 - By undoing, lessening, or preventing ongoing human impact
- Not all restoration does this
 - Where climate and soil drastically altered, ecosystem restoration may require perpetual human management—watering, fertilization, burning, & removing more suited incomers
- RIN favors removing, human-introduced, invasive animals
 - Before they have a chance to spread
- Example
Invasive rabbits in Australia
- Early removal of the European rabbits introduced into Australia in 1800s would clearly have lessened overall human impact on Australian continent
- Entanglement view on human-introduced, invasive animals?
 - If introduction harmed them, eradication would be a failure of reparation
 - But given rabbits vector by which humans harm far more animals, eradication involves less harm overall
 - Does entanglement view allow killing a few innocents, to whom we owe duties and who are not in danger, to prevent killing far more innocents?



RIN sometimes more interventionist than entanglement view

- Entanglements that benefit wild animals or are neutral do not need to be rectified
- RIN oppose benefitting as well as harming wild animals
- Condone removal of benefits or neutral impacts were it to enhance naturalness
- Removing exotic fish
 - If fishermen built fish ladder to extend range of mountain trout into lake once devoid of fish
 - RIN favor removal
 - Entanglement view would not
- Climate change making birds smaller (& less beautiful?)
 - If this does not harm them, no response needed on entanglement view
 - RIN consider interventionist policies to reverse/undo this human impact



Conclusions

- Wild animal suffering is real and significant
- Many--including animal advocates and environmentalists--don't take it seriously
- Taking it seriously puts the two groups at loggerheads
- I've tried to take it seriously, while generally supporting non-intervention in nature
- RIN a crucially important value in today's world and it validates the laissez-faire approach
- RIN has some advantages over Palmer's non-entanglement view in supporting laissez-faire
- The laissez-faire intuition is really the naturalness intuitions
- Palmer's attempt to justify it w/o appeal to naturalness involves some significant shortcomings

Clare's writings I'm using



- Palmer, Clare (2016). "Saving Species but Losing Wildness: Should We Genetically Adapt Wild Animal Species to Help Them Respond to Climate Change?" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XL*, pp 234-251.
- Palmer, Clare, (2015) . "Against the View That We Are Usually Required to Assist Wild Animals," *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 3, 2: 203-210.
- Palmer, Clare & Larson, Brendon (2014). "Should We Move the Whitebark Pine? Assisted Migration, Ethics and Global Environmental Change," *Environmental Values* 23 (6):641-662.
- Palmer, Clare (2011). "Does Nature Matter? The Place of the Non-human in the Ethics of Climate Change," in Denis Arnold (ed.), *The Ethics of Global Climate Change* (Cambridge University Press), pp. 272-291.
- Palmer, Clare (2010). *Animal Ethics in Context* (New York: Columbia University Press).



Human impacts massive, global

- $\frac{3}{4}$ of earth's suitable land actively used



- Overfishing and acidification devastating sea life



- Dam most rivers and consume $\frac{1}{2}$ of surface fresh water



- Our exotics homogenize ecosystems



- Causing species extinction at 100 to 1000 times background rate



- Raise planet's temperature 2-5 degrees Celsius -- affecting local climates and thus virtually all organisms

"Human activities are . . . affecting the structure and functioning of the Earth system as a whole."

(Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill 2007)

