

Chapter 17

“Eek! A Rat!”



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Abstract Rats are often despised. In what way does such aversion affect moral deliberation, and if so, how should we accommodate any distorting effects on our normative judgements? These questions are explored in this chapter with regard to recent proposals in (1) the ethics of pest management and (2) animal political theory. While ethical frameworks and tools used in the context of animal research can improve moral deliberation with regard to pest management, we argue based on psychological factors regarding the perception of rats that before implementing these methods in either animal research or pest management, one needs to ascertain that rats are owed genuine moral consideration. With regard to animal political theory, we identify three issues: truth-aptness, perception, and moral motivation. To complement as well as address some of the issues found in both animal research ethics and animal political theory, we explore compassion. Starting from compassion, we develop a pragmatist and interspecies understanding of morality, including a shift from an anthropocentric to a multispecies epistemology, and a distributed rather than an individual notion of moral agency. We need to engage with the experience of others, including rats and those who perceive these animals as pests, as well as pay attention to the specific way individual agents are embedded in particular socio-ecological settings so as to promote compassionate action.

Limits

*Who knows this or that?
Hark in the wall to the rat*

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*Since the world was, he has gnawed;
 Of his wisdom, of his fraud
 What dost thou know
 In the wretched little beast
 Is life & heart
 Child & parent
 Not without relation
 To fruitful field & sun & moon
 What art thou? His wicked cruelty
 Is cruel to thy cruelty*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

17.1 Introduction

Amidst human-dominated landscapes rats, both the brown (*Rattus norvegicus*) and black rat (*Rattus rattus*) are found in abundance. This particular co-existence of species can be found across history. Neither fully wild nor domesticated, in-between nature and culture, they are considered *liminal* (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). When they do venture away from human presence, the impact of rats can reverberate throughout landscapes, affecting whole ecosystems and species—though, as we should add, this pales in comparison to anthropogenic impact. Moreover, rats and humans alike display tremendous capacity to adjust and adapt to prevailing circumstances: modern urban space is home to both of them.

Any cross-species similarities have not kindled affection, as rats are one of the most despised creatures by humankind. Disease, destruction, disturbance, and death have become closely associated with their species:

the Norway Rat is undoubtedly hated and feared by more people and in more countries in the world than is any other animal. These people see in it a filthy animal, destroyer of property, spoiler of food, carrier of bubonic plague and many other terrible diseases, attacker of human beings, particularly defenseless babies. (Richter 1968, 403)

We could offer a litany of frightful depictions of both brown and black rats to make our case, but we believe that the sentiment expressed just now suffices, and still holds. Aversion to rats is furthermore reflected in the way humans treat them. Slow-acting poison, neck-breaking spring traps, and body-fixating glue traps are some of the methods used in pest-management.

Such strong aversion in perception and the use of harsh measures appears to starkly contrast with the idea that human beings owe moral consideration to these non-human animals (henceforth “animals”). Indeed, rats are paid scant attention in moral and political philosophy, with some notable recent exceptions that we will discuss this chapter. Nonetheless, if moral concern is premised on being sentient—which we assume to impose a compelling sufficient condition for moral concern—rats

are clearly among those who are owed direct moral consideration. So, despite the aversion that colors the way in which humans generally perceive rats, we need to take them seriously in our moral deliberations and actions.

Here, we explore this tension between moral consideration and adverse perception by looking at recent work in moral and political theory, starting with (1) proposals to extrapolate the methodology of ethical assessment of animal research to the field of pest management, to (2) then look at the political turn in animals ethics. Both hold great potential to improve human interactions with liminal rats but are not without issues themselves. One of the main problems for both accounts is the way in which moral agency is vulnerable to adverse perception of the rats subject of moral consideration. Moreover, the political turn in animal ethics (resulting in a field which we will call *animal politics*) is, in addition to the issue of adverse perception, confronted with a tremendous gap between theory and current treatment of animals, lack of moral motivation, and the skeptical question which political account of interspecies co-existence is true. These issues are probably more challenging when it comes to rats. In that sense, if philosophers would succeed in safeguarding ethical treatment of liminal rats, there appears not much in the way of accomplishing genuine interspecies justice. We believe that compassion provides the most promising route for doing so.

17.2 From the Lab to the Liminal

An historical account of medical development in the twentieth century would be radically incomplete without rodents such as the brown rat, *Rattus norvegicus*. Still, today, much of preclinical research continues in its reliance on rats as models for studying human disease.

Parallel to the rise of the “lab rat”, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed an emergence of moral concern for animals, spurred in part by the burgeoning field of animal ethics that has thrown out its nets across the sundry and often separated human-animal interactions that characterize modern societies. Within the context of animal research, following up on discussions on the subject between, amongst others, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, a variety of ethical frameworks have been developed to engage in ethical deliberation regarding the exploitation of animals for the sake of research goals. As such, it provides a resource for other practices of animal treatment. Some suggest applying these frameworks to the context of pest management based on the principle of consistency (Meerburg et al. 2008; Yeates 2010). The implementation of the principles of refinement, reduction, and replacement paired with a structured way of weighing harms and benefits could greatly improve the management of animals that are regarded as pests (Meerburg et al. 2008).

Apart from the obvious benefits of implementing ethical scrutiny and general principles where reflection is found lacking, perhaps we need to ascertain that this type of ethical deliberation is apposite for dealing with liminal rats. To do so, let’s unpack (a)

the ethics of animal research in itself as well as (b) applying it to liminal rats. To start with the former, some would argue that the harm-benefit analysis between protecting human health and harming animals resembles something akin to a life-boat situation, where the only chance of survival is to throw one individual overboard, boiling down to the choice of saving a human or an animal life. But perhaps such a metaphor misses the point, as it is not clear that animals are in such a relation to human patients.¹ As Anders Schinkel (2008, 56) puts it,

The animals are not in the lifeboat at all, until we take them on board. In reality, there is no proper analogue for the benefit the animals in the lifeboat would receive if human beings sacrificed themselves. Sick people that die ‘because’ no research has been done on animals do not sacrifice themselves for the animals. What happens is that human beings, like all creatures, fall ill sometimes. If it is serious, they may die. All this does not affect the lives of animals, so long as we do not make it so. To begin with, there is no lifeboat. Research on animals constitutes the lifeboat itself; only when we see research on animals as part of the initial situation— when we accept this as given—can we say that there is a lifeboat, that it is us or them.

In that sense, the harm-benefit analysis of animal research ethics is already biased towards humans as animals have often nothing to gain from the exchange. More accurately formulated then, it generally involves an “animal harm – human benefit analysis”. The central moral issue is whether the use of animals in research for a human benefit can be justified, not who to sacrifice of those with similar interests at stake.

What justifies the combination of harm-benefit analysis and the three principles? The three principles (reduction of numbers of animals, refinement to decrease suffering, replacement in terms of alternatives) impose a constraint that can be supported by many, without touching the central moral question of whether it is justified to harm animals for the benefit of humans. Rather, they assume that this is the case, pointing towards opportunities to ameliorate the harms involved. So, the question most pertinent is: how does one justify harming animals for the benefit of humans?² For now, let’s assume that animal research ethics in terms of harm-benefit analysis and the three R’s proves sound. How does this translate to the context of liminal animals that are perceived as a threat to human interests?

A first thing to flag is the variety within animal research and management of pest animals. The need for, respectively, knowledge or control measures differs in strength. Some research is more important than other research. Similarly, some conflicts with liminal rats are more serious than others. In both cases an assessment of the weight of interests and potential harms is warranted, so a systematic harm-benefit analysis appears valuable for the management of conflict with liminal rats. The two also differ from each other. While research animals are wholly dependent and vulnerable

¹And we could question the added value of such lifeboat-deliberation as thought experiment in the first place (Donovan 2006).

²Note that the ethical assessment does leave room to reject any invasive research involving rats.

in relation to humans, liminal animals are under the influence of human beings and sometimes even rely on human activity for their survival but remain undomesticated.³

As long as we restrict ourselves to situations where the interests of liminal animals and humans conflict, the model of ethical assessment used in animals research could work; assuming that the aforementioned concerns about animal research ethics itself have been successfully addressed. It does, however, not tell us anything about the way we should configure our relations with liminal rats apart from the conflicts that could arise. Moreover, some conflicts only arise precisely because a broader outlook is lacking. Do humans have any obligations towards liminal rats beyond the negative duties of not harming them unnecessarily (inflicting suffering, depriving of life)? And if so, how should we implement such imperatives in our lives? So, while the model of animal research does provide certain opportunities to improve our treatment of liminal animals in situations of conflicting interests, its scope is rather narrow in the light of the inextricable nature of human-liminal animal co-existence. Moreover, if we would restrict ourselves to conflicts with liminal animals and develop ethical frameworks for this purpose specifically and only, then we may inadvertently bolster negative associations like fear and disgust already attached to these animals.⁴ Before looking at a model for co-existence, we need to address the ways in which rats are perceived and how this affects moral judgments regarding their fate.

17.3 How Fear and Disgust Impair Moral Judgment

Associations like fear and disgust can run deep. When Albert Camus wrote his book *La Peste*, published in 1947 and generally interpreted as an allegory about the emergence of fascism, he did so by reference to rats and their supposed role in spreading diseases like bubonic plague.⁵ In the book, both in literal—as harbingers of disease, suffering, and death⁶—as well as in metaphorical sense—infesting society with

³Part of the ethical assessment of animal research could pertain to the conditions in the lab that shape rat’s lives, whereas this does not directly or only in part applies to liminal rats; their lives are heavily shaped by human action but not determined to the same extent as their lab counterparts.

⁴A similar mechanism is at work in the increase of attention for wild animals in the context of infectious disease emergence (Stephen 2014). The sort of attention matters. As wild animals become associated with disease reservoirs, the dependencies and vulnerabilities of their own health stay in the background. Only a partial representation of them, as participants within disease ecology of zoonotic disease (pathogens that jump species boundaries from animals to humans), make their appearance on stage. So not only are they reduced to their role in the emergence of disease, they only capture the interests of researchers if they play a role in the emergence of diseases that affect humans (zoonoses) or their interests (for example, economic interests related to diseases that affect livestock production).

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/jan/05/albert-camus-the-plague-fascist-death-ed-vulliamy>. Accessed 23 March 2020.

⁶See Dean et al. (2018) for a challenge of the hypothesis that rats were the primary vectors during the Second Plague.

authoritarianism and exclusion/extermination of “the other”—rats signify misery; a mingling of fear and disgust.

Aversion appears to cut even deeper than mere fear for infectious disease. The aversion for certain liminal animals, especially rodents, could have evolutionary roots. Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham (2007, 116) argue from an evolutionary perspective on human psychology that “(d)isgust appears to function as a guardian of the body in all cultures, responding to elicitors that are biologically or culturally linked to disease transmission (feces, vomit, rotting corpses, and animals whose habits associate them with such vectors)”. Aversion to rodents could prove valuable to protect human health if these animals are indeed associated with the threat of infectious disease. Perhaps humans are hardwired to dislike certain animals.

Nevertheless, there is some plasticity to disgust. Disgust is, like taste, relative to one’s cultural setting and background. We could learn to overcome primal disgust for certain foods, such as durian fruit,⁷ that would almost without question instill disgust if we encountered it at a buffet being previously unaware of its existence. Perhaps we would have liked durian if we were acquainted with its taste from early age on. The other way around, people can learn disgust. In addition to primary objects of disgust, where the emotion of disgust functions as a “guardian of the body”, “in most human societies disgust has become a social emotion as well, attached at a minimum to those whose appearance (deformity, obesity, or diseased state), or occupation (the lowest castes in caste-based societies are usually involved in disposing of excrement or corpses) makes people feel queasy” (Haidt and Graham 2007, 106). Does disgust as social emotion affect our beliefs about rats? It is not much of a stretch to take seriously the possibility that in addition to the evolutionary hard-wired disgust of rats, disparaging social representation—in part most likely driven by this evolutionary backstory—further fans the flames of aversion.⁸ This is all the more relevant considering the possibility that disgust works as a “moral magnifier” (Ivan 2015). When we are confronted by a moral problem, requiring ethical judgment, there is some indication that the emotion of disgust could throw us off guard, doubling down on our negative dispositions regarding the situation at hand.

Whereas liminal rats are generally associated with filth and disease, those in the lab are perhaps freed from the adverse associations of their con-specifics “out there” but at the same time objectified as epistemological resources, as models for human disease.⁹ Or perhaps there are different perceptions in play alongside each other. While some point out that “advantages of rodents include their small size, ease of maintenance, short life cycle, and abundant genetic resources” (Bryda 2013, 207) make for a great

⁷Durian fruit can be found in various countries in Southeast Asia and generally people either hate or love its scent. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durian>. Accessed 23 March 2020.

⁸Moreover, “having a rat problem” is associated with stigma itself (Van Gerwen and Meijboom 2018).

⁹Are the sorts of ethical reflection with regard to animal research structured in a way to arrive at trustworthy judgments, and are they truly attuned to the suffering inflicted on individuals? Or do the number of animals and the way they are described and brought to the attention of those making the ethical assessment foreclose or otherwise heavily sway intuitions?

“animal model”, aversion could very well explain why, since the beginning of the twentieth century, rodents, and not dogs, have become a primary “animal model” for invasive research. Narratives about animals have significant power to structure human action (see also Robin et al. 2017). The way perception affects our moral psychology often remains hidden in the background, and because these “are not always introspectively accessible, even a moral action can take place against the background of unconscious, non-virtuous tendencies of cognitive response” (West-erhoff 2017, 299). Given explicit aversion regarding rats, there is at least work to be done in unraveling human perception and its effect on moral judgment, so as to ascertain that moral psychology and its dynamics do not hinder fair assessment of the interests of rats involved, liminal or lab. As we will discuss now, these concerns also plague models for co-existence.

17.4 Rat Politics

While animal research ethics provides a source for an ethics of conflict resolution between liminal rats and humans, animal politics builds upon the work in human political theory. The most prominent and recent example is found in the work of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011), who develop a theory of denizenship for liminal animals.¹⁰ Such political accounts go beyond mere conflict as they aim to establish the ground-rules for human-liminal animal co-existence. Whereas animal research ethics substantially but modestly sets new standards, animal politics ambitiously ups the ante by speaking in terms of moral rights and justice. Such justice will not come easy, considering (1) the way in which humans have subjugated non-humans throughout history, something apparently ingrained in culture at large, and (2) the way in which economic and self-centered interests have become institutionalized and vested (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 252). Political philosophy can help to engender novel perspectives on animals, but we need to be careful not to get carried away, as

(d)eveloping new and expanded theories of animal rights may be intellectually stimulating and challenging, but can it make any difference to real-world campaigns and debates? We are not optimistic about the prospects for dramatic change in the short term, and we certainly have no delusions that one can somehow change the world simply by articulating better moral argument ... [which] ... are notoriously ineffective when they run so fully against the grain of self-interest and inherited expectations. (ibid.)

Compounding these concerns, the language of justice may prove insufficiently persuasive with regard to rats due to their liminal status and association with disease,

¹⁰This is part of a three-way distinction of groups of animals, a delineation that determines the extent and existence of positive obligations to animals in addition to universal basic negative animal rights. Next to understanding liminal animals as denizens, domesticated animals become citizens, and animals in the wild are best understood as members of sovereign wildlife communities. Group-membership of individual animals differentiates specific rights and obligations, resulting in three distinct and political understandings of human-animal interaction.

fear, and disgust. If animal politics has to work against the grain of institutionalized anthropocentrism and egoism, any theoretical defense for a species so often despised, however compelling in itself, will likely fail to capture the public imagination. Up for the challenge, several political theorists (including Donaldson and Kymlicka) have begun to look into the factors that motivate individuals to act upon philosophical theory. Perhaps this search also provides a way to take liminal rats seriously in moral deliberation.

17.5 Failure of Imagination

Before looking at liminal rats specifically, why does the vast majority of people not live up to the tenets of animal ethics and politics? Perhaps it is due to “failings and limits of the imagination” (Cooke 2017, e4). Imagination provides a portal to approximate the experience of others. A failure of imagination renders one ignorant of the needs and interests of others, paving the way to moral inertia. Arguments emerging out of animal ethics and politics require fertile soil, which is why, according to Steven Cooke, we need to identify and promote the social conditions that shape moral imagination “as a precondition for non-human animals to be properly recognised as beings owed justice for their own sakes” (ibid.).

Not any sort of imagination will do. Conservative works of art and fiction, Cooke argues, probably often hamper the kind of imagination needed to recognize the entitlements of animals. More specific, we assume that the work of, say, J.M. Coetzee serves as a progressive example of cultivating imagination attuned to ethical interaction with animals. Distinguishing conservative from progressive works of art is not sufficient, however, as the latter could in reference to individual freedom unhinge individuals from the collectives that form the sometimes-unbeknownst fabric of their lives. Amitav Ghosh, for example, painstakingly makes the case in his book *The Great Derangement*, published in 2016, that those anointed with the task of imagination (novelists in particular) too often overlook a collective more-than-human imagination due to their preoccupation with autonomous individuals, all the more unsettling given the immense ramifications of climate change.

Will imagination indeed motivate moral agents to act justified or just towards liminal rats? Granting some level of epistemic access to the experience of others—walking a mile in their shoes—could prompt consideration. While imagination plays a role, we should perhaps not overstate its ability to spur agents into morally praiseworthy action, nor expect it to dispel all negative associations that cloud our judgements. The sort of imagination matters.

17.6 Sympathy for the Rat

If imagination is not sufficient in and of itself, what is? Let’s distinguish between different ways of relating to the experience of others, including (1) sympathy, (2) empathy, and (3) compassion. Although none of these can be articulated in any undisputed sense, we understand sympathy as the ability to relate to the suffering of others. While it attunes one to the other, this engagement could remain rather cognitive, predominantly based and geared toward one’s own suffering—“I would suffer if that would happen to me!”—and lacking in motivational impulse (Bloom 2017, 59). To improve upon imagination, narrowing the motivational gap, we need something more. Empathy goes further as it involves the ability to feel (approximately) what others feel, so more affective, making “it possible to resonate with others’ positive and negative feelings alike — we can thus feel happy when we vicariously share the joy of others and we can share the experience of suffering when we empathize with someone in pain” (Singer and Klimecki 2014, r875).

Empathic concern can weigh heavily on one’s shoulders, possibly resulting in empathetic distress, a state of suffering because others suffer. Such distress can lead one to turn away from the suffering of others in order to relieve suffering or result in overall fatigue when one continues to remain in the grip of empathy. So while empathy can spur individuals into action, it could do so primarily out of one’s wish to stop the experience of empathetic distress rather than an other-regarding act out of beneficence (Halifax 2011). There are further reasons why various theorists see in empathy a shaky foundation for fostering moral action. Whereas empathy links one to the other, it does so in ways that could actually hamper genuine moral concern. Empathy falters in the face of collective suffering, as “a single individual can evoke feelings in a way that a multitude cannot” (Bloom 2017, 127). Moreover, empathy can strongly bias moral concern to the suffering of those near and dear (e.g. *ibid.*; Gruen 2013; Kasperbauer 2015).

Avoiding the pitfalls of empathy, some put their trust in compassion instead. Whereas empathy involves feeling (approximately) what the other is feeling, compassion interweaves the awareness of suffering of others with the motivation to alleviate it: “In contrast to empathy, compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other’s wellbeing. Compassion is feeling for and not feeling with the other” (Singer and Klimecki 2014, r875).

Don’t we need the empathetic ability to feel what the other is feeling in order to jump in action? No. If “I see a child crying because she’s afraid of a barking dog. I might rush over to pick her up and calm her, and I might really care for her, but there’s no empathy there. I don’t feel her fear, not in the slightest” (Bloom 2017, 64). Feeling for rather than feeling with allows compassion to become rational, as Bloom puts it, informing our reasoning and deliberation without too much of a danger of falling victim to the perils of empathy. Compassion makes one susceptible to the suffering of others in a different way altogether compared to empathetic distress. Whereas the latter is preoccupied with oneself, inciting negative feelings with possible detrimental

consequences for one's health and wellbeing, compassion turns towards others (both in terms of affect and motivation) with feelings of kindness or even love, giving rise to wholesome benefits for those who act compassionately (Singer and Klimecki 2014). Compassion attunes one to the suffering of others, prevents empathetic distress, and could perhaps help to bridge the motivational gap bothering animal theorists.

17.7 Compassion: A Stepping Stone?

The potential of compassion to motivate people to care about and alleviate the suffering of others cannot but entice moral and political theorists. Cheryl Abbate (2018, 45; emphasis original) argues that we should view compassion as a “*prerequisite* to being just. And if we have a duty to act justly towards animals (human and nonhuman), as the philosophy of animal rights holds, it follows that we have a duty to fulfill the prerequisites of being just”.

One needs to foster compassion in order to act in accordance with justice. Compassion becomes a stepping stone for political theory in making sure that the moral agents are able to abide by its principles. Here we could wonder whether there is more to compassion beyond being instrumentally valuable in facilitating just action. Abbate herself asks whether we should reserve a key epistemic role for compassion in our moral inquiries given its tremendous moral potential. A reason for rejecting this suggestion, as she argues, is to point out that compassion does not help the “lifeboat deliberator” we encountered earlier in this chapter. If one finds oneself in a lifeboat, pondering the question who to throw overboard, the following question appears difficult to answer: “Who should I show compassion to: the laboratory mice or the sick children?” (ibid., 41). This is why, while hesitant to attribute a more substantial role to compassion in moral inquiry, Abbate instead claims that: “*If moral agents have a duty to treat animals justly, and if being compassionate is necessary for moral agents to act justly, then moral agents also have a duty to cultivate compassion*” (ibid., 45–46; emphasis original). Animal rights theory sets the standard, and compassion helps individuals to make it happen. If liminal rats have rights, we should foster compassion in order to act in accordance with the demands of their entitlements. This could help to overcome the strongly negative and biased outlook many humans hold with regard to rats.

Abbate's imperative raises two questions: (1) how does one cultivate compassion and (2) is it true that moral agents have a duty to treat animals justly? To start with the former, Buddhist philosophy offers a rich source of contemplative practices, some of the specifically geared towards cultivating compassion. “*Metta bhavana*, or loving-kindness practice”, as Abbate explains, “typically involves meditation-related techniques that foster feelings of benevolence and kindness for all beings, human and nonhuman” (ibid. 44; emphasis original). Several research studies support the claim that fostering compassion results in more prosocial and altruistic action (e.g. Singer and Klimecki 2014). Abbate also highlights humane education, referring to the initiatives of both Jane Goodall and Marc Bekoff to foster compassion and

respect for life through training and education in various sorts of settings. Meditative practice, together with humane education, can help to cultivate compassion, creating the conditions for moral agents to ascertain animal justice.

So it appears there is a way to foster compassion, so as to make individuals attuned to the suffering of liminal rats and inclined to help. But to return to our second question: What if people remain unpersuaded by animal rights theory? Abbate starts from the assumption that animal rights are theoretically convincing enough to jump into the facilitating potential of compassion. However, if indeed the problem of truth-aptness raises its head, the motivation to foster compassion could turn out question-begging. What if one is not convinced by the imperatives derived from animal rights theory, or on the fence about which theory proves sound? The instrumental reason to engage in compassion then loses much of its grip. Do we indeed first have to see the truth of animal rights theory to then develop our compassionate capacity in order to act in accordance with it?

Fleshing out the relation between compassion and rights-theory is helpful at this point. Should we indeed regard compassion instrumental to the demands of justice? Are there other ways of drawing the links, and how do these stack up to this claim? One could distinguish between at least three perspectives on this relation. As Abbate has it, (1) animal rights theory delivers the moral imperatives putting compassion in place as a psychological condition to get moral agents to do the right thing.¹¹ Others (2) understand the relation more in terms of opposition, endorsing either compassion or justice. The rift between care-ethics (Luke 1992) and rationalistic ethics (Singer 2011) comes to mind. At the far side of the spectrum, we find those who put compassion at the center, not at the disregard of rights-theory per se but providing the possible ground for such arguments to arise (Garfield 2001).

Is compassion the handmaiden of animal rights? We argue that putting compassion front and center comes with particular virtues, especially with regard to human interactions with liminal rodents. What are these virtues? Let's first identify several challenged faced by animal rights theory:

(1) any specific animal rights theory is vulnerable to the challenge of truth-aptness. While this is not the place to discuss the issues raised by error-theorists, anti-realists, relativists and the like, as long as there is widespread disagreement on whether one particular political theory of animal rights has correctly identified the true way to guide human-animal interaction, a gap between theory and practice appears difficult to bridge by reference to truth.¹²

(2) the language of rights, entitlements and impartial requirements appears especially ineffective with regard to animals who have become almost inseparable from adverse associations shaping human perception.

(3) finally, in line with the previous concern, and apparent in the attempts to make moral agents inclined via imagination (see Cooke 2017) or compassion (see Abbate 2018) to act in accordance to the precepts of animal rights theory, there is a problem of moral motivation. Moreover, rights theory builds (implicitly or explicitly) upon the idea of autonomous agency and the ability to transcend one's culturally and in other ways shaped behavior based on arguments primarily.

¹¹Like Cooke who takes moral imagination as a social condition for endorsing animal rights theory.

¹²See DeGrazia (1996) for an approach to animal ethics that tries to accommodate this concern.

How does compassion navigate these issues? Below we will outline a notion of morality that requires endorsement of claims by individuals across species divides. Understanding morality in terms of interspecies engagement is less vulnerable to sceptic concerns, requires humans to develop clear and unbiased perception of liminal rats, directs us to compassion, and likely motivates humans in the process.

17.8 Compassion: Cornerstone of Interspecies Morality

For any sentient being, suffering is an inevitable part of one's life, and undeniably undesirable in a primordial way. In a sense, moral systems and morality in general appear fundamentally dependent on the existence of suffering, attested for example by the guiding strength of non-maleficence and beneficence within Western moral philosophy, and the often central role of compassion in for example Buddhist philosophy.¹³

We have already encountered a way to infuse animal politics with ideas originating from Buddhist philosophy; i.e. Abbate's rendering of loving-kindness meditation as a way to foster compassion, which in turn functions as an imperative for moral agents so as to be able to act in accordance with animal rights theory. This approach, however, is vulnerable in terms of its starting point. What if one, on a theoretical level, doubts the validity of right claims of liminal rats? The reason to foster one's compassion evaporates if not for the sake of motivating moral agents to acknowledge animal entitlements not only in theory but also in practice. Are there any reasons to take compassion more seriously apart from its instrumental value?

Why should we start from compassion? Here, we limit ourselves to two particular ways in which compassion can emerge. First, compassion can arise out of a way of seeing reality as fundamentally interdependent. Rather than seeing oneself as an individual, unhinged from the interspecies fabric of life, we could lessen the grip on ourselves, cultivating compassion in the process (Garfield 2001). Here, the moral imperative of compassion follows from a metaphysical realization of reality as radically interdependent, including oneself. In this sense, compassion is intimately tied up with one's perception of oneself. We need to ask ourselves whether there is "something very special, very independent about the self, something that could justify the distinction between my suffering or well-being and that of others as a motive for action" (Garfield 2015, 90). The less one attaches to a strong independent notion of self, the more one opens up to suffering of others, including other sentient beings such as rats.

But we need not go metaphysical. Some see the imperative to alleviate suffering not to arise primarily from a metaphysical realization, or derived from ethical theory, but as a task right in front of us. Rather than offering a solution of how to deal with

¹³Of course, compassion is found in many other traditions and religions, including Christianity, Taoism, etc. Here we follow up on the thread that connects to Buddhist philosophy so as to complement Abbate's angle.

the moral complexity of everyday live, the quest for truth in metaphysics and ethics could cloud our moral perception, numbing us so that we do not recognize the moral salience of suffering and the compassionate presence it calls for (Batchelor 2012).¹⁴ Instead of falling into metaphysical dispute, or fervent theorizing, we should face suffering wherever we find it and simply address it as best as we can (Glassman 2003). Of course, theorizing can be useful in fostering moral action, but when it fails to do so, it becomes superfluous or even detrimental to achieving moral goals. Indeed, this aligns with pragmatists, who largely opt out of protracted ethical discursive dispute as well as the opposition between absolute truth and full-blown skepticism. Rather than continuing to ponder the question of justification, they usher each and every one towards the moral imperatives right in front of us.¹⁵

If pragmatism indeed dodges the charge of truth-aptness, haven't we then lost our moral bearings, let alone compassion as a guiding force? Whereas some pragmatists, perhaps most famously Richard Rorty, dismiss the notion truth altogether, we do not think there is a need for them to do so, if we hold that

engaging in genuine moral inquiry – searching for principles and for particular judgements which will not be susceptible to recalcitrant experience and argument – requires that we take our beliefs to be responsive to new arguments and sensibilities about what is good, cruel, kind, oppressive, worthwhile, or just. Those who neglect or denigrate the experiences of others because of their gender, skin colour, or sexual orientation are adopting a very bad means for arriving at true and rational beliefs. They can be criticised as failing to aim at truth properly. (Misak 2002, 104)

We can salvage legitimacy of our moral claims, as Cheryl Misak proposes, by putting them to the test across a wide range of individual experiences, so as to aim at truth. Such a pragmatist account of morality aims at truth by means of its methodology, buttressing certain basic moral claims on the condition that they have been endorsed across a diversity of individual human experience. This will not get us absolute truth, nor sway all sceptics, but neither is required from a pragmatist perspective.

Of course, among other contingent characteristics such as age, we should add species to Misak's list of “gender, skin colour, or sexual orientation” as well. Note that this goes beyond the recognition of individuals as recipients of mere moral concern. The methodology sets down the conditions for an *interspecies morality*. We uncover what we should do in interspecies engagement, consulting and approximating the

¹⁴Secular Buddhists, including Stephen Batchelor, have interpreted Buddha's teachings as tasks rather than metaphysical truths to avoid the pitfalls of ongoing theoretical dispute. Buddhism, on this reading, involves a rather pragmatist attempt to address the inevitable and unmistakable suffering that permeates all sentient life. Of course, this is not the place to engage in exegesis, nor provide a comprehensive overview of the many different strands within Buddhist philosophy, or the various commitments to compassion across cultures throughout history. The reference to Buddhist philosophy provides a distinct perspective on compassion, again, further exploring the connection that Abbate draws between current animal politics and Buddhist philosophy going back all the way to the teachings of Buddha himself.

¹⁵Several authors, including William James himself, have recognized affinity between Buddhist philosophy and pragmatism (e.g. Scott 2000).

experience of other sentient beings as best as we can.¹⁶ It will certainly not always be clear what should be done, though deliberation is not always necessary as there will be many situations where a compassionate outlook readily informs us what to do. As issues become more complex and diverse, however, insufficient endorsement is expected, which requires us to tread carefully, and/or allow for pluralism. Such an approach builds morality from the ground up, again and again putting normative claims against the test, requiring robustness and awareness of a diverse range of perspectives before letting such claims guide our moral interactions (Misak 2002).

Buttressing moral claims in line with the methodology, remarkably, gets us on track towards compassion, as it requires individuals to consult the experience of others (human and non-human) before endorsing a moral claim and act on it. Perhaps it is easier to determine which claims would be rejected by individuals across species, rather than to determine what they genuine would want. We anticipate that at least significant suffering will be vetoed across sentient species. It is hard to fathom the possibility that others endorse one's claim to inflict suffering upon them or reject your assistance to alleviate suffering if feasible. Of course, this goes both ways. We would want others to not inflict suffering upon us nor turn away from our suffering if they could easily help us. Not being made to suffer would appear to garner endorsement from sentient beings if we would (be able to) consult them. The requirement of *interspecies experiential endorsement* invigorates any moral agent to not only imagine but also engage with the other's perspective. In requiring engagement with the experience of others, this perspective on morality fosters compassion in the process. Moreover, as far as we can trust interspecies inquiry only when pursued as Misak (2002: 155) advocates "as far as it could fruitfully go", engagement with the experience of others avoids the empathetic pitfalls identified earlier.

17.9 From Anthropocentric to Multispecies Epistemologies

Seeking endorsement requires an effort to approximate the experience of others as best as we can. Many epistemic issues arise in trying to bridge species boundaries—or even intra-species ones. We cannot get to a subjective, first-person perspective from an objective stance.¹⁷ What do we know (e.g. Donaldson and Kymlicka 2016) about the capacities of animals to make choices in a certain socio-ecological setting? These are concerns at a rather cognitive level, susceptible to empirical informed

¹⁶See also Clemens Driessen (2014) for the idea of animal deliberation. Josephine Donovan (2006) argues for a dialogical development of care ethics. The work of Donaldson and Kymlicka is rife with examples of acknowledging and promoting animal agency, so that humans can reasonably infer, from carefully reading their behavior, what animals truly want. Eva Meijer (2019) goes beyond behavior by investigating language from a multispecies and interspecies perspective. See Kate Manne (2017) for the idea of bodily imperatives, where the normative content and force is believed to reside in the vulnerability of being embodied. All these examples could very well fit within the idea of building an interspecies morality based on interspecies experiential endorsement.

¹⁷See Nagel (1974).

reasoning and research. We also need to address the more affective challenges that could hinder our ability to cross the species barrier. Some animals elicit disgust, fear, or any other sort of outright aversion that, as we have already indicated, could bias moral judgment. On the view of morality outlined just yet, these aversions not only distort our moral judgments but prevent genuine morality from coming into existence in the first place. Aversion for rats could (a) negatively affect our deliberations about them as moral subjects, and (b) make us rather unwilling to explore what they really want as participants in developing an interspecies morality. So, we not only have a moral but also an epistemic reason to uncover the aversions that color the way we perceive rats. It is why we need to go beyond anthropocentric epistemology and turn towards a multispecies version instead.

A clear view paves the way for genuine moral concern and to open up our minds to rat agency.¹⁸ Strong feelings of aversion are not the only thing that distorts our perception. Less obviously, scientific modeling of rats also shapes the way we see rats. As epistemological models, they are viewed in terms of how they shed light on the intricacies of human health and disease.¹⁹ Despite swaths of data, knowledge about rats often drifts atop underlying currents of human interests and perspectives. We fail to genuinely know rats, as we investigate them within the self-imposed limits of their preordained usage (Despret 2015).

In the field of pest control research, a similar epistemology is present albeit with a notable difference. Where in medical research the rat functions as a model for humans, in pest control research there is a genuine interest in the rats for the animals that they are. Nonetheless, such knowledge about rats is readily turned against them. In response to poison- and bait-shyness in rats—respectively the avoidance of food containing poison and avoidance of food free from poison of the sort previously encountered as containing poison—researchers developed baits containing slow-acting anticoagulants (substances that prevent blood from clotting) in order to sever the association between eating something and developing illness due to internal bleeding (Naheed and Khan 1989). As a result, rats die a slow and excruciating death. Another example: rats apparently map their environment in terms of predatory risks, which is why “(r)odent management could be more efficient and effective by concentrating on those areas where rodents perceive the least levels of predation risk” (Krijger et al. 2017, 2396), ironically, there where the rats feels most safe. As a third example, the inescapable sexual attraction of pheromones excreted by the male brown rat proves fatal for those female rats who cannot withstand the allure of the synthetic counterpart of these pheromones used to lure them into traps (Takács et al.

¹⁸While evolutionary history appears to underpin human aversion for rats, and these associations could very well prove difficult to overcome, the phenomenon of black rats considered as holy creatures at the *Karni Mata Temple* in Dethnoke, India, gives us a reason to be hopeful about the possibilities of replacing overtly negative associations with at least more positive ones. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karni_Mata_Temple. Accessed 23 March 2020.

¹⁹Whether pre-clinical animal research indeed provides a sound methodology for developing human health interventions is highly questionable due to the myriad biological differences between species (e.g. Greek and Menache 2013; Pound and Ritskes-Hoitinga 2018).

2016). Again, knowledge about rats cannot be separated from the human interests to control them.

All the more striking, considering the above, is the lacuna of knowledge about liminal rats in the urban context. While one of the species studied most extensively in medical research, rats remains elusive in their urban setting. Precisely there where rats are perceived as a problem, ecological knowledge is scarce. Why is that? One reason could be that

(u)rbane rat ecology [...] remains vastly unexplored because these animals are cryptic, crepuscular, difficult to identify, and hazardous to handle. Additionally, the high-rise buildings that block satellite link-ups, underground sewers and subway tunnels, and rebar enforced concrete covered landscape make it difficult—if not impossible—to track urban animals using traditional radio telemetry. Consequently, there are few ecological studies with free-ranging urban rats. (Parsons et al. 2015, 1)

In addition to the fact that obtaining knowledge about rats in an urban environment is difficult, perhaps the lack of research interest is in part due to the lack of perceived urgency and relevance. As long as the perceived problem is addressed in terms of pest management and conflict there is no need for further scientific research to improve upon the practice.²⁰ The lack of knowledge about liminal rats hinders development of policy to address human-animal co-existence. Whereas rats are generally associated with threats to health, it is difficult to quantify an acceptable level of risk. As common in policy making, one has to decide in the face of uncertainties and incomplete knowledge. Still, the predicament of such decision-making does require one to ascertain whether enough has been done to gather information—and, getting back to the point of interspecies morality, whether rats themselves would endorse the measures taken.

What about research that shows that rats giggle when tickled (Panksepp and Burgdorf 2010), release another rat from confinement to share a piece of chocolate (Bartal et al. 2011), or come to the rescue of a distressed conspecific (Sato et al. 2015). All of this research strives to highlight its relevance to understanding human social behavior, while incidentally illuminating rat empathy in the process. Of course, this type of research raises questions of moral legitimacy. Even if we would like to know more about rats unperturbed by any other interests, developing a multispecies rather than anthropocentric epistemology, moral concerns restrict the possible ways of getting to know each other. Still, we can learn from what we already got while at the same time thinking about new ways for interspecies engagement. Rats rescuing each other to share chocolate could tell us something about the evolutionary shared characteristics across species, shedding light on human social behavior. However, rather than seeing the ingenuity and empathetic concern displayed by rats primarily as proxies for human counterparts, or turn these capacities against them, these findings can help us to establish a clear view of rats, and, furthermore, seeing how rats themselves would endorse compassionate action.

²⁰Of course, ecological approaches to liminal rodent management do demand more research into the urban ecology of liminal rats.

Whereas an anthropocentric epistemology is geared towards using or eradicating rats, a multispecies epistemology helps to envision new perspectives on co-existence. It escapes the boundaries of how we ordinarily see our shared landscapes by trying to approximate the way in which rats and other animals see reality. Whereas interspecies morality disavows invasive animal experimentation as a way to know animals, multispecies epistemology requires that we go beyond the human perspective in order to acknowledge the manifold other ways in which other individuals, including those from other species, experience the world. It requires that we shift perspective and see the urban environment as an animal collective embedded in myriad socio-ecological interconnections. Rats are remarkable inhabitants of urban and human-dominated landscapes, and as apparent from the discussion above, humans need to do much more to really get to know the rat’s perspective, especially considering that morality demands endorsement across the species divides.²¹

17.10 From Philosophical Deliberation to Compassionate Engagement

What do metaphysical disputes, skewed perception of animals, and wavering moral motivation tell us philosophers? These concerns are even more pressing with regard to (liminal) rats and taking them seriously in moral consideration: theories remain provisional in terms of their specific moral and political status, anthropocentric epistemologies cloud human perception, and rats are unlikely candidates to benefit from uncertain moral motivation. Fostering compassion could remedy these concerns. By means of contemplative practices and humane education, we might develop a less biased view of rats, getting familiar with their experience of the world, and extend our compassion based on the recognition that their suffering is not categorically different from those of other sentient beings, ourselves included. However, the moral imperative for autonomous agents to foster compassion through loving-kindness meditation perhaps assumes some sort of *moral privilege*. Whereas being a competent moral agent already sets a substantial standard, a requirement to engage in such contemplative practices even ups the ante.

In addition to personal growth by means of contemplation, compassion ushers us to look at the situation at hand in all its complexity. We need to acknowledge individual and situational differences regarding capacity for compassionate action. Some people

²¹What about the gap between “is” and “ought”? Are animals not locked within the domain of “is”? Perhaps ‘the problem’ as Steven Shaviro aptly puts it ‘is not to derive an “ought” from an “is,” but to see how innumerable “oughts” already *are* ... nonhuman animals *do* continually ascribe value to things, and make decisions about them—even if they do not offer the sorts of cognitive justifications for their value-laden actions that human beings occasionally do ... (o)ur own value activities arose out of, and still remain in continuity with, nonhuman ones—as we have known at least since Darwin. We perpetuate anthropocentrism in an inverted form when we take it for granted that a world without us, a world from which *our own* values have been subtracted, is therefore a world devoid of values altogether’ (2015, 24; emphasis original).

are naturally endowed with a caring demeanor, whereas for others compassion does not come easy. Some are nudged by their social environment, whereas others have to swim upstream in waters inimical to compassionate action. If we put compassion front and center, we need to carefully consider where someone is coming from so as to foster compassionate action as best as we can. Here a difference between a justice and compassion approach becomes apparent. As the former will speak to the will of individuals to live up to the imperatives of theory, or else they are blameworthy, the latter will primarily look at the situation at hand in order to spot opportunities to promote compassionate action.

One of the ways in which to foster compassion is, as we have argued, to genuinely engage with the other. In engagement with the experience of others and taking this inquiry “as far as it could fruitfully go” (Misak 2002, 155), we develop an awareness of suffering across the boundaries of species. An interspecies view of morality in terms of engagement is not merely cognitive, but also socially interactive. Reflective deliberation, imagination, and individually cultivated compassion (for example by means of meditation) indeed provide important building blocks for moral engagement but remain insufficiently imbedded in social interaction. Considering that our perception of the world and our moral agency emerges out of social interaction, it is perhaps too much to expect individually-oriented practices to dramatically improve moral action. Notwithstanding the relevance of philosophical reflection, the arts, and contemplative practices, we furthermore need forms of engagement like humane education, as Abbate emphasizes, and other ways of engendering genuine interest in the experience of others, so as to know what we should do.

Moreover, shifting our emphasis in morality from deliberation to engagement, we can inform our method by various insights from moral psychology. What does it take for individuals to act with compassion? Rather than relying on individual willpower alone, we should explore supporting socio-ecological conditions of compassionate action. Such a perspective can help us track *compassion determinants*: what socio-ecological factors affect the ability of individuals to perceive and act with compassion when confronted with liminal rats? And how do we bring such an approach to bear on the management of human-rat relations?

Preventive approaches to human-liminal rat conflicts emphasize an ecological awareness so as to take measures that avoid future conflict as much as possible. Knowledge about the ecology and behavior of liminal rats here can function as a way to open up the minds of people to understand the inevitability of conflict when ecological processes are ignored in the management of the human-liminal rat interface. In addition, we suggest, professionals in the field of “pest management” could play a role as *multispecies epistemologists* in promoting compassionate human-liminal rat interaction. They could do so by, in addition to (a) communicating knowledge that fosters ecological awareness with the aim to prevent future conflict, also via (b) certain narratives and other communicative approaches to make others engage with the lived experience of individual rats. In doing so, they could clear up any overtly negative associations attached to the rats in question and motivate clients to take an interspecies approach to their moral decision-making. Insights from psychology could help at this level to promote a compassionate outlook. While

we should be careful not to put all responsibility on the shoulders of these individuals at the danger of forgetting the various forces shaping human-rat interactions (legislation, availability of animal welfare compromising measures, dynamics between service-providers and clients in a market-economy, etc.), both in terms of conflict-negotiation and co-existence mediation, these professionals do play a key role in shaping interactions between humans and liminal rats.

17.11 Conclusion

As James Albrecht (2004, 25) interprets Ralph W. Emerson’s poem, “the rat is ‘cruel to thy cruelty’ – that is, ‘wicked’ and cruel only when defined as such from a narrow anthropocentric perspective”. We have argued that moral perception is vital in ascertaining genuine moral consideration, which puts the onus on those making moral judgments about the fate of (liminal) rats to critically evaluate the way in which negative associations color the way in which they perceive these animals. Moreover, being one of the most despised animal species across human cultures, rats can be considered a litmus test for moral philosophers and animal politics. If people take the interests of rats seriously in moral consideration, then nothing would appear in the way of a genuine just interspecies society. In that way, thinking about and with rats could engender a novel perspective on morality; as something that emerges out of engagement across species-divides, with an emphasis on fostering compassion. We need to compassionately engage with the experience of others, including rats and those who perceive these animals as pests, as well as pay attention to the way we are all embedded in particular socio-ecological settings so as to promote compassionate action. Rather than viewing compassion as instrumental to attaining animal rights, instead we should view elaborate theoretical accounts of interspecies co-existence as ways of expanding moral imagination and fostering compassion.

It is up to philosophers, among others, to find ways to promote and facilitate moral actions that are robustly endorsed across species. Indeed, Buddhist philosophy provides a valuable insight for its general devotion to compassion, and we have indicated a way forward based on this insight in line with pragmatist inclinations. Perhaps compassion lacks the epistemic role in guiding specific moral action but we have argued that in the specificity of our lives and moral problems, we should tread carefully anyway. In other words, the “lifeboat-deliberation” is not necessary better off in the possession of theoretical knowledge, considering earlier discussed concerns about the truth-aptness such moral claims. The buck stops somewhere, perhaps such that “(w)hen we are faced with the unprecedented and unrepeatable complexities of this moment, the question is not “What is the right thing to do?” but “What is the compassionate thing to do?” (Batchelor 1998, 48).

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