

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Wild Animal Suffering and the Laissez-faire Intuition

ABSTRACT

Are we required to assist wild animals suffering due to natural causes? The laissez-faire intuition (LFI) says that we are not. On this view, although we may have special duties to assist wild animals, there are no general requirements to care for them. In this article I critically examine the origins of the LFI and assess its reliability. In particular, I attempt to provide answers to the questions such as how people who have come to endorse this intuition form it and whether it is a genuine moral intuition. I conclude that the LFI is the result of various external factors that influence and overpower people's genuine intuitive moral judgment and for that reason it should not be trusted.

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1. Introduction

Many wild animals endure great suffering due to various natural causes: disasters, starvation, disease, just to name a few (Ng 1995, Horta 2010, Animal Ethics 2016). Assuming that sentient wild animals are morally considerable, are we required to prevent or alleviate their suffering if we could do so without excessive cost to ourselves? In her book *Animal Ethics in Context*, Clare Palmer famously defends the view, labeled by herself as the *laissez-faire intuition*, according to which, although we may have *special* duties to assist wild animals, there are no *general* requirements to care for them (Palmer 2010, 68). Palmer draws support for this view from her observation that this intuition is widely held among people. In this article I critically examine the origins of the LFI and show that it is unreliable. In particular, I argue that contrary to what this intuition says, many people are in fact seriously concerned about the well-being of wild animals and if it nevertheless *seems* that many people share this intuition, it is not because they genuinely believe that we are not required to assist wild animals but because their actions and/or beliefs are often influenced by various external factors that overpower their genuine intuitive judgments.

2. Palmer's Mistake

The introduction of Palmer's book *Animal Ethics in Context* informs us that the core ideas of this book are developed in accordance with the *laissez-faire intuition* – the idea that we simply do not have general duties to assist fully wild animals. On this very intuition is based Palmer's whole relational account of positive duties that determines to which individuals we owe assistance. On this account, the requirement to assist others is created only on the basis of special relations or circumstances, one of which is being causally responsible for creating the need of assistance (Palmer 2010, 84, 121-123).

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The immediate worries arise when we realize that before completely relying on this intuition, nowhere does Palmer examine whether it is reliable in the first place. This is worrisome especially in the face of the fact that even avid intuitionists acknowledge the fallibility of our intuitions and others, who are skeptical of intuitions, also regularly advise us to take a “critical stance toward common intuitions” (Singer 2005, 332). To be sure, Palmer does acknowledge the fallibility of our intuitions and notes that they may be a poor guide to knowing what we ought to do but she takes no measures to ensure that the LFI is reliable.

As it seems to me, Palmer supposes that because this intuition is widely held, it must be trustworthy. But this is implausible, for there are intuitions that are widely or even almost universally accepted but they are nevertheless unreliable. A paradigmatic example is our intuition that incest is *per se* morally wrong. Most of us are very confident that sexual relationship between siblings, for instance, is morally abhorrent, yet when we critically reflect upon this intuitive judgment, we notice that we cannot offer good reasons in its support.

In endorsing the LFI uncritically, Palmer failed to notice a red flag – the fact that the implication of the LFI conflicts with another, much more powerful and widely held intuition, according to which, we ought to assist humans in distress when we can do so without excessive cost to ourselves. The power and influence of this intuition is best demonstrated by Peter Singer’s famous drowning child thought experiment (Singer 1972, 1997), which had managed to convince overwhelmingly many people and continues to do so till this day. If Palmer’s favored *laissez-faire* intuition conflicts with the intuition underlying this thought experiment, so much the worse for Palmer. To be fair,

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it is possible to avoid conflict between these two intuitions. It could be argued that there is no real conflict between these intuitions, for one concerns wild animals, while another concerns humans. But unless our critic is a speciesist (and I assume here that speciesism is indefensible), I do not see how these intuitions can be reconciled or coexist in one's mind. The implication of the *laissez-faire* intuition is that if we are not required to assist wild animals, and this is explained by the appeal to the lack of special relations with them, then we are also not required to assist complete strangers with whom we have no such relations. The implication of another intuition is that if we ought to assist suffering humans regardless of our relations with them, then we should be equally concerned about the equal suffering of animals in the wild. So, to be consistent in our moral reasoning, either we are not required to assist wild animals and therefore humans too or we are required to assist both. The conflict between these intuitions is more than clear. Given this, one cannot coherently maintain both intuitions; one of them must be given up at the initial stage of reflective equilibrium. Which one should it be? If we have to choose between two contradictory intuitions, I suggest, we should side with the one that, other things being equal, has the strongest pull, and it seems clear that the LFI is not the one.

So, it appears to me that Palmer is not justified in trusting the LFI and adopting it as a foundation for her relational account of duties of assistance. But she seems to have an explanation for doing the opposite: "But rather than abandon the *laissez-faire* intuition, I wanted to see whether it was possible to construct arguments that would support it or at least render it plausible" (Palmer 2010, 3). While I do not think that this is a good reason to write an entire book based on such a problematic intuition, I should admit that the resulting book undoubtedly makes a valu-

able contribution to the debates concerning our duties to assist animals in different circumstances.

3.The Problems with the Defense of the LFI

In her book *Animal Ethics in Context*, Palmer opens the discussion by telling the story of a tragic fate of thousands of wildebeests drowned while crossing the Mara River. She emphasizes the fact that virtually no one present at the tragic scene felt obligated to do anything on behalf of these animals. Most importantly, no criticisms were expressed post factum toward anyone who failed to provide any kind of assistance to the helpless animals. Palmer takes this story to be a clear demonstration of our genuine attitudes toward wild animal suffering – that we just do not have obligations to assist wild animals.

I think Palmer is mistaken to suppose that this story provides any support for the LFI. The problem is that the story is so complex that it does not allow us to confidently infer what we truly believe about wild animal assistance. Palmer insists that if onlookers such as tourists, photographers and the members of conservation organizations really felt obligated to assist the drowning wildebeests, they would have tried to rescue at least some of them or divert the herds toward safer crossing places. I think that the onlookers' inaction in this case is not best explained by the fact that they did not feel obligated to assist the animals. For it is very well possible that they did feel obligated to help these animals but nevertheless did not act because they thought assisting was unfeasible in this case. After all, one cannot simply redirect the enormous herds consisting of hundreds of wildebeests and one cannot simply pull the drowning panicked animals out of the water either. Whatever was the reason for the onlookers' inaction, it is not at all clear that it was their intuitive judgment that they just do not have obligations to as-

sist wild animals. The absence of the public criticism of their inaction can be explained in the same way – perhaps the public too thought that assisting wildebeests really was impossible in that case.

Palmer's appeal to the drowning wildebeests' case in defense of the LFI seems unconvincing especially in the face of the countless examples showing that many people are in fact seriously concerned about the well-being of wild animals. It is not unusual that many people often demand the onlookers witnessing an instance of wild animal suffering to act and provide assistance to the suffering animals instead of simply observing the tragic moment. The examples of the public concern for the well-being of wild animals include well-known cases such as the starving polar bear (Mittermeier 2018), walruses falling off the cliff (West 2019) and beached sea animals. Many people were initially furious and outraged by the fact that the photographers did not feed the skeletal polar bear starving to death, nor did the camera crew attempted to prevent several walruses from falling off the cliff to their death. The public anger was slightly reduced after the confronted parties tried to explain and justify their inaction, although many people remained unsatisfied with the explanation. The situations involving beached sea animals also provoke similar controversies. It is quite common to see many people desperately trying to save beached sea animals and when others deliberately fail to provide assistance the public is always up for expressing harsh criticism.

To provide a further defense of the LFI, Palmer explains why most people are committed to believing that we have no duties to assist wild animals. She argues that the requirement to assist wild animals is extremely demanding and that is why people tend to think that there are no such requirements (Palmer 2010,

72). But even if it is true that the real reason behind people's denial that we have duties to assist wild animals is the fact that assisting wild animals is extremely demanding, this still does not provide any support for the LFI. This is because if the demanding nature of wild animal assistance was the only real reason for people to think that we are not required to assist wild animals, then they would hold the view that assisting wild animals is required *unless* doing so is extremely demanding – that is, that the duties to assist wild animals exist only in cases when wild animals can be assisted without excessive cost to oneself. This view is incompatible with the LFI, for the latter denies in principle that there are duties to assist wild animals. Thus, the LFI cannot draw support from the appeal to the fact that wild animal assistance is extremely demanding.

4.The Origins of the LFI

Although the cases I discussed above clearly display the public concern for the well-being of wild animals, it may nevertheless seem that many people's default position on wild animal assistance affirms the LFI. For example, the wildlife tourists, photographers and camera crew would often rather observe and capture various instances of wild animal suffering than intervene to prevent or mitigate them. Also, people viewing the materials depicting wild animal suffering do not necessarily think that people witnessing the scene should have done something to prevent or alleviate it. In what follows I suggest that there are at least two influential factors that play a crucial role in determining people's actions and/or forming their beliefs concerning wild animal assistance and for that reason I conclude that the LFI does not reflect what people really think about wild animal assistance and thus is not a genuine moral intuition.

Previously I suggested that the *practical impossibility* of providing assistance to wild animals is a major factor that discourages people to act even if they really wish to assist wild animals, and I insisted that this should not be taken to mean that people reject the idea that we have duties to assist wild animals. Here I suggest that the *ignorance* of how to prevent a particular instance of suffering can demotivate people to even try it. In many cases people are not in a position to provide help to wild animals because doing so often requires special knowledge and expertise that many ordinary people lack. Even when no special knowledge is required, assisting wild animals nevertheless seems to be a complicated task due to other factors (e.g., not knowing how to approach and/or restrain a suffering animal, how an animal will react to our help, etc.) that often baffle most people. It is thus a mistake to judge people's reactions in such cases as conveying their genuine stance on wild animal assistance. This seems to be what Bernard Rollin has in mind when he notes that the LFI "may be more a matter of a rationalization growing out of not knowing how to proceed than a genuine moral intuition about one's obligations" (Rollin 2012, 250).

In many cases assisting wild animals seems rather easy. Feeding hungry animals and giving water to thirsty ones are one of the simplest ways people can assist wild animals; nevertheless, many people tend to be reluctant to do so. People's reluctance to assist animals in these cases can be, I suggest, explained by what I call the *authority influence*. To see what I mean by that, consider the following quote by David Attenborough:

Sometimes a problem is more complicated than it seems. I watched something which was absolutely agonising – a small baby elephant that was dying of thirst and the whole family was several days from water. This

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poor little thing was dying and you think, why didn't you give it a bucket of water? But you're in the desert and you don't have a bucket of water and the thing is very close to death and has to walk for another three days if it was going to get to water, so all you're doing is prolonging the death. All you can do there is watch tragedy. But tragedy is part of life and you have to show it. You can't have sunshine throughout your life. To have done anything else would only have made matters worse and distort the truth (Sherwin 2019).

Attenborough's main emphasis here is on the fact that assisting wild animals is often more complicated than it may seem at first sight and thus requires a cautious approach. But saying that we should be cautious while assisting animals is one thing while saying that assisting wild animals often "makes matters worse" and it is thus best to leave animals to their fate is quite another. The first message encourages people to be cautious, while the latter discourages people to interfere with the natural processes and encourages them to let the nature take its course. It is the latter message that has been established as a dogma among wildlife photographers and filmmakers for a long time. Indeed, this dogma is so strongly followed that a BBC wildlife film crew's decision to assist a group of penguins trapped in a gully was considered as an "unprecedented move" (Zhang 2018).

The influence of authoritative figures like Attenborough can significantly affect people's judgments and their actions when they are in a position to assist animals. The environmentalists' and conservationists' authoritative warnings that any intervention will have disastrous and deleterious consequences often "silence" the ordinary people and prevent them from expressing

their honest intuitive reaction to the suffering of wild animals. As a result, people often would rather allow wild animals to suffer than assist them even if circumstances permit people to assist animals without “making matters worse”. Given this, to regard people’s failure to assist wild animals as their genuine moral stance on what we owe to wild animals would be misleading.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Palmer’s belief that many people share the LFI is groundless. I have tried to show this by appealing to the countless examples that prove just the opposite – that many people are in fact seriously concerned about the well-being of wild animals and they often require others to assist suffering animals. I have also argued that when people’s actions and/or beliefs affirm or align with the LFI, this fact should not still count in favor of the LFI, for these people’s actions and/or beliefs are often the result of the influence of external factors and do not represent their genuine moral thought.

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