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On the Status of Vermin

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Introduction

In animal rights there has been a proliferation of material discussing the ethical treatment of agricultural animals and animals used in research. The topic of this paper and will contain an assessment of a different qualification of animals that has been paid little attention in most academic traditions; this is vermin. Vermin is a colloquial word employed to discern an animal that is unwanted. Vermin is an interesting topic as oppose to 'invasive species' or 'maligned species', which have been paid considerable attention, because those titles do not necessarily connote the same as 'vermin'. There are two main objectives to this paper: the first is an epistemic concern – how do we know what is a vermin. This, of course, has a metaphysical component: do vermin have an ontological status aside from how humans categorize them? The second objective is mainly ethical – given the criteria of vermin and how we treat them, how ought we treat them?

The first objective of this paper is to define what qualifies as vermin. The entails drawing distinctions between invasive species other terms and vermin, as well as

mapping out the characteristics that make an animal qualify as vermin. Eventually it will be shown that the category of vermin is conventional in society, which, in itself, has implications that will be discussed in the second objective. It is my hope that in formulating criteria for vermin, it might be possible to distinguish between different types of vermin, potentially leading to different methods for treating them. In deciphering criteria we will be forced to look at the causes of vermin, and since vermin will be shown to be a convention of society/human civilization, that is we have literally created the title but we enable some animals to live in ways that make them candidates for being vermin, which implies that 'vermin' do not have 'natural' ontological status, we are left with the question: do we have responsibility to them? This question leads to the second objective of this paper: a discussion on the moral concerns surrounding vermin and the potential implications.

There are many issues that arise from the first objective. Some of them will be discussed and other issues will be relegated to a lesser status and, consequently, they will only be outlined or mentioned, but could be discussed with further research. Here is a preliminary listing of the different ethical questions. First, given that there is a growing social concern for animal rights, why is it that the animals we see as vermin have not been extended the same rights? Is there a logical or practical basis for this, or is it simply an aesthetic dislike? Do we have the responsibility of treating them as something more than vermin if they are a creation/by-product of our society? Second, the criteria and treatment of vermin, in some cases, rely upon an idea of ecological soundness, which leads to the question: can concerns for animal rights lead us to a form of environmental ethics, which has in some cases relied upon a type mysticism or an articulated but un-

argued belief that living things, in virtue of living, have intrinsic value? Third, if there are discernable criteria for vermin, can we logically extend our criteria to include other animals that are not normally considered vermin, namely ethnic groups or lifestyles of different humans? This relies upon the idea that if we can logically extend principles (like rights) to animals, contrarily, we must be able to extend those same principles that we use for animals to humans. Herein, lies a problem: the logical extension or movement is in someway inappropriate, the treatment of some animals that we categorize as vermin, or we ought to treat some humans as we treat vermin. Ultimately, I will conclude that our ethical beliefs coupled with the dangers and ineffective methods of extermination mandate that we ought to employ alternative methods for limiting populations of vermin and all potentially hazardous animals.

Discerning Vermin

Vermin and others

Often we employ the word vermin to animals that we are not fond of, and, in some cases, these words and ways of acting towards those animals is rationalized. In cities or more populated areas vermin is employed to animals that pose certain health concerns, but in rural areas were agriculture is the predominant life-style vermin is used in conjunction with animals that are destructive to the land or the ecological system. Here there are already two different types of vermin, health vermin and destructive vermin, but before we can investigate these different types a comparative analysis of labels that are applied to animals will help in establishing the importance and difference of vermin.

Philosophical consideration has been targeted namely at invasive species, and most of the this has been generated out of ecological concern. The importance of this work should not be underestimated for I feel that the natural habitats are important to maintain and this can lead to a concern for environmental ethics, but our project is different. When ecologists, philosophers, and others discuss invasive species they usually mean invasive *alien* species – that is, species that are not native to the ecological system they are inhabiting and probably destroying. Yvonne Baskin accurately describes some problems with invasive alien species: "these invaders dominate, disrupt, out compete, prey on, hybridize with, or spread disease among native species or alter the terms of life in the community of changing the soil, the available light or water, the frequency of fire, or even the structure of the landscape." (Ibid., 3) These invasive alien species are problematical for ecological equilibrium (if we are willing to assume that equilibrium of a biotic community is value-laden, which is an issue that cannot be dealt with here, but will be assumed on the basis that many people do value the natural environment to some degree) and vermin, who can be classified as invasive species, are too. However, invasive species must be an assemblage of animals that are not native and are, in some way, destructive/disruptive to the ecological equilibrium. Additionally, vermin is a term used with animals and usually only small animals, although as we will see there are exceptions, while invasive alien species connotes plants as well as animals.

While there are differences between invasive species and vermin there are also similarities. Most people are familiar with the invasive species problems that Australia faced in the 19th century. The most famous of which is probably the rabbit problem. Rabbits came to Australia as cargo on ships of convicts and settlers for food from the

1770's through the early 1800's. While rabbits, in this situation, are invasive species, they also fit the criteria of vermin: small animals, destructive, hazardous, over-populated, etc. The lesser-known Madagascar rubbervines in Queensland, while similar in many regards, do not qualify as vermin because they are plants. An in depth discussion on the specific problems associated with the invasive species in Australia can be found in the book They All Ran Wild by Eric Rolls, although he calls invasive species and vermin 'pests'.

Pest is another term occasionally employed as an informal synonym with vermin, but pest does not necessarily suggest the dangerous or destructive nature that vermin does. A pest is similar to a varmint, but a pest can be something that is merely annoying. However, both pests and vermin usually imply animals *and* insects. While there may be interesting philosophical problems or issues with insects and some may posit that insects also deserve moral consideration, it is not a position that will be entertained in this essay. For the sake of this discussion when vermin is used it will only refer to the animal division of pest/vermin.

Here vermin are different from invasive species and pests. In some cases, vermin are pests and/or invasive species, but this paper is chiefly concerned with the cases of animals that we consider vermin, some of which are not necessarily alien. A large portion of this paper focus on rats because many people think of rats as vermin, although some think of rats as pets or friends. Rats provide an interesting case because they are seen as a parasitic animal that lives on the outskirts and feeds on the waste of human society – ought we consider them invasive species or alien? We can formulate this question as 'can we think of sewers as natural ecosystems?' Ultimately, we will

conclude that sewers are non-natural and thus we cannot consider vermin invasive. Similarly, prairie dogs, which live in their natural habitat, are considered vermin. The first problem that arises is how we define what is natural. Some like to think that there cannot be anything that is non-natural. The argument is as follows. If animals are natural, and humans are animals, then humans are natural. Or if animals cannot produce something non-natural, and humans are animals, then humans cannot produce something non-natural. Basically, this is a holistic argument that relies on the notion that something natural cannot do anything that is non-natural – or that something synthetic cannot be constructed from something organic. There are many objections: one might deny the first or second premise in the first syllogism: one might argue that not all animals are natural (genetic engineering, cloning, breeding, etc.) or that humans, because of our cognitive capacities, are different from animals, which are both fairly tenuous arguments. Additionally, one might object that the term natural is still not defined and that the terms 'natural', 'organic', and 'synthetic' are 'shifty terms'. It suffices to say that there are many conceptual issues with what is or can be considered natural that cannot be fully explicated here.

One might also examine, how one can say that an animal is alien: if all animals are part of the earth, how could one animal be alien to a particular part? I believe that alien is used, *as per* invasive species, in a more refined sense. That is, an alien species is one that would not have originated without outside help – e.g. humans bringing rabbits to Australia. Again, 'outside help' is defined vaguely here. Without positing that there is some sort of divine plan or intervention (i.e. for understanding 'outside'), and without firmly taking a stance on what is natural and what is not, we cannot conclusively state

that humans bringing rabbits to Australia is unnatural or that rabbits are alien. Given these conceptual problems, I believe it is the case that rabbits are, in fact, alien to Australia. Imagine a world in which humans never lived and there were never any intelligent beings or intelligent-raft-creatures able to transfer rabbits from Europe to Australia: would there ever have been a rabbit over-population problem in Australia? No. This is what is meant by 'alien' in discussing invasive species. Additionally, we use 'invasive alien species' for a group of animals that necessarily disrupt the ecological equilibrium/stability or bring some harm to the ecosystem that it would not face in the same way if the alien species had not been introduced. Vermin can be invasive species, but vermin are not *necessarily* invasive species or invasive species are not necessarily vermin given how we have broadened the scope of vermin to include animals that are destructive in their natural habitat. Additionally, vermin are not necessarily invasive species because, as we will see later, they have a more intimate relationship with humans than invasive species.

In conclusion, vermin are not plants, they are not insects, and they are not necessarily alien in the same sense that invasive species are. At this point one might object that vermin is a vague colloquial term and that it is still being used vaguely here, with a few limitations generated for this essay, and vermin is not yet as defined as invasive species. This objection is exactly right. Although, I am limiting the ways in which I speak of vermin, I hope to show that vermin, as a colloquial word, is vague. Unlike 'invasive alien species' which clearly defines and demarcates a specific problematic group of animals, 'vermin' is not as articulated. Vermin is a nebulously defined group (of animals (in this case)), lending it an air of equivocation. The problem

is that we have not yet settled the issue of what makes an animal a vermin, only what the difference is between invasive species and vermin and pests and vermin, in the hope of showing differences and perhaps elucidating a problem. I am not suggesting that vermin are dramatically different from invasive species and pests, but unlike invasive alien species, vermin is a bit harder to define. We turn to that problem now.

Defining Vermin

There are two types of vermin – health risk vermin (HV) and destructive vermin (DV). Because our discussion in the last section mentioned invasive species, which are similar in many ways to DV, we will start with that classification and then move to HV.

Invasive species are species that are alien to the natural ecosystem that in some way jeopardize ecological equilibrium/stability, as discussed above. The rabbits of Australia fit the criteria of vermin because they were destructive animals, thus fulfilling the criteria for vermin. This seems to show one way of conceptualizing DV, but there is another way. For example, in many of the mountain states of America prairie dogs pose an enormous threat. Prairie dogs burrow underground riddling a field with holes providing a dangerous and potentially costly medical care for horses and annoyance for contractors. Because of their problematic nature to horses and development they are seen as DV. But because of the annoying nature of prairie dog holes *and* their overwhelming abundance, which does not impact many people, they are seen by some as vermin. Most people, however, see prairie dogs as cute, but it is my hope to show that when they become labeled as vermin people feed justified in exterminating them. It is often the case that prairie dogs are not invasive species because they are natural inhabitants of the ecosystem, yet we categorize them as DV and attempt to eradicate them in many ways

because they can be tremendously dangerous to horses, concrete foundations, and annoying to developers.

There is another problem with prairie dogs. Although they live in their 'natural habitat' (i.e. they were not transplanted by humans to the mountain states, on to horse farms, and/or lots being surveyed for strip malls), humans have altered their natural habitat by eliminating many of their natural predators, namely coyotes. In a short report entitled "Population Status and Trend of Selected Small Game, Furbearers and Varmints in Colorado", Harvey Donoho focuses on the depletion of small game. Donoho's study, published in 1979, is far from conclusive, but foreshadows the coyote population's demise: "If the population maintains itself at the 1979 level, it should approximate the 1983 population objective. The current harvest level is far below the 1983 objective. Unfortunately, data are not available over a sufficiently long period to estimate long term trend patters or what might be considered as normal populations fluctuations." (Ibid., 56) If the 1979 harvest is far below the 1983 objective, there would need to be a great population boost to maintain the population objective for 1983, so there exists a tension between the first and second sentences of this quote. This quote seems inconclusive, but he does note that at that in 1979 the coyote population was less than it probably should be for the year 1983. Furthermore, if we factor in human population growth in Colorado from 1985 to 2000, which has doubled, leading to urban sprawl, and thus the elimination of coyotes from many native areas where prairie dogs are now over populated, we clearly see that the coyote population has been severely diminished. (Note: this argument relies on the abundance of prairie dogs and the absence of coyotes to prove that coyotes have diminished, which could be considered begging the question. However, it seems to me

that this is, in fact, what has happened.) The lack of coyotes is problematic because if there are not as many natural predators, then there will potentially be too many survivors and this is the case for prairie dogs. By eliminating the prairie dogs natural predators, they have been able to breed at extraordinary rates, thus becoming a hazard not only to horses and contractors but also to their natural ecosystem. This concern furthers the notion that prairie dogs are vermin, however it is no fault of their own – they are doing what it is prairie dogs have always done, but they are no longer constrained by predation. To combat the over-population of prairie dogs many have taken to killing them in anyway that is most efficient (cost effective): digging up their burrows, blocking their burrows to suffocate them and starve them, hunting, smoking-out, among others. However, this approach is faulty: it attempts to assuage the symptoms without heeding the disease. The disease in this case is the unbalanced ecosystem caused by the lack of predation on prairie dogs. The symptom is too many prairie dogs. If we want to limit the prairie dog population, we can attempt to eradicate them, but chances are they will be back. Or we can re-introduce predators that would naturally feed on prairie dogs in an attempt to reestablish an ecological equilibrium. This second option has it own problems: it might be hard to identify what the 'natural ecosystem' was, as there may not be any record of it, as Donoho intimates; it might endanger humans if predators are introduced to a place where prairie dogs are a problem and it is in close proximity to human establishments; the predators may not be able to populate the area because of human establishments, etc. While there are problems with the second option – re-introducing predators to naturally reduce vermin populations – it is probably the most ethical option if we postulate that all animals, even those that we find annoying, problematic, and ugly,

have a *telos*. The issue of a *telos* will be discussed in detail in the section entitled "Including Vermin" in the second objective.

Another type of DV is vermin who are destructive to human enterprises, not ecological stability as mentioned above. To fully elucidate what is meant by DV that are destructive to human enterprise, we'll turn to deer and then rats. These examples will show how an animal can be destructive in a 'natural' and 'non-natural' sense and will segue to our discussion of HV.

Prairie dogs are destructive to the ecological stability of an ecosystem because they are over populating. In the mid-west, prairie dogs are not a problem, but deer over-population is harmful for ecological and economic reasons. Deer have overpopulated many areas and our solution is to have an annual hunting season, which helps to limit their expansion. Bill Adler in his book, Outwitting Critters, argues that hunting is not effective to controlling the deer population, which is also used as a rationalization against some ethical concerns: "hunting has little effect on population size; it neither stabilizes nor reduces the population…no matter how many hunters there are, it would take an unmitigated act of carnage to significantly reduce the deer population." (Ibid., 127) Deer have become a problem and will continue to be so because expansion of suburbia into what was 'deer territory' (land that deer inhabited prior to suburban expansion), the decrease or total elimination of predators has enabled unfettered population growth, and the attractive habitat and sources of food humans cultivate. As a child who grew up in the mid-west, I used to see deer occasionally on farms or near highways, but mostly I saw deer on the shoulders of streets: bloody and bloated, killed by a driver who wasn't expecting a deer to be traversing the road. Occasionally, I would hear about how deer

would find a neighbor's garden and eat anything green. Now when I visit the mid-west, deer are ubiquitous: they still lay on roadsides, but they're also in my parent's back yard, or walking across the street, or being chased by the neighbor's dog. In the places that used to be farmland now stand commercially developed subdivisions. Simply stated, the deer have nowhere else to go other than from subdivision to subdivision. Deer 'over population' is a problem that humans have caused. In some areas the over population of deer, the lack of predators (once again, coyotes), the forced/constrained habitation of deer populations, and the abundance of grains has caused thousands of dollars in damage to cars (people who have hit deer), threaten the ecological diversity in wild-life preserves (although, one should not blame the depletion of ecological diversity solely upon the deer's appetites), and have a considerable amount of damage on crops. "The Pennsylvania Farmer's Association claims 36.4 million dollars' worth of damage by deer each year." (Ibid., 125) Most suburbanites, myself being one of them, do not traditionally think of deer as vermin; however if we look at the damage they cause and our more contemporaneous attitudes toward them, they fit our criteria. Like the prairie dogs in the western states, if we postulate that they have a *telos* (unlike prairie dogs, many people are enthralled by the majestic beauty of deer, which probably elicits some sort of sympathy for not simply killing, thus adding to our concern) then there are ethical issues in how we ought to limit the deer population problem, especially if hunting is as ineffective as Adler argues.

Rats, unlike prairie dogs or deer, are vermin that are present in all societies. They are problems for urbanites, suburbanites and rural communities. Rural communities have problems with rats, as well as mice, because they tend to inhabit places that enable them

to easily access human buildings, barns, houses, and silos to name a few. In urban and suburban places, rats tend to live in sewers or places that are congenial to the rat-life-style, which are normally out of view of humans. Like any animal, rats would rather have a safe, warm place where food is readily available then a cold, wet, hostile environment in which food may not be easy to find. In turn, rats have probably been living in and/or around human settlements since the first civilizations. They have adapted to live in close proximity to people and rely on humans for their life-styles because humans, in creating a place for humans to live, have produced waste to eat and areas congenial to the rat-life-style. Because rats live in cohabitation with humans (a more intimate relationship than invasive species) and they have nasty behaviors that humans find annoying or troublesome, they are candidates for vermin-hood. A pamphlet released by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare states, "Rats in the human environment cause enormous economic losses. They consume or contaminate vast quantities of food and feed, and they destroy other property, as when they cause fires by gnawing the insulation of electric wires." It continues, "Each rat damages between $1 and $10 worth of food and other materials per year by gnawing and feeding, and contaminates 5 to 10 times mores. Thus, rats may cost the United States between $500,000,000 and 1,000,000,000 annually in terms of direct economic losses." (Ibid., 1) The losses, in this case, are economic not ecological, and are extremely impacting on the United States.

Perhaps prairie dogs and rats are a poor example because they hardly elicit an emotional response from most readers, yet, sympathy for the animals is not my objective. The objective here is to outline the problems with DV. Unlike invasive species, which are introduced to an ecosystem, DV do not have to be invasive. DV can

be destructive in their natural habitat, albeit one that has been altered by humans, and they can cause enormous amounts of destruction in human societies. The point of this section is to establish the ways in which an animal can be thought of as a DV. We now turn to HV, health risk vermin.

People have a seemingly irrational fear of mice, yet people tend to think that mice are cute creating a strange dichotomy. As Bill Adler articulates, "Consider the fact that in books and cartoons, mice are celebrated: There's Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and Mighty Mouse and other pint-sized squeaky heroes. When it's cat-versus-mouse in the cartoons, the mouse is always the good guy." (Ibid., 147) At the same time, a sitcom character mentions a mouse and the token-wife will jump onto a chair and refuse to get down until it is apprehended or eradicated. Although, mice, like rats, cause a considerable amount of economic damage, this fanatical response, which occasionally seems exaggerated in the media until experienced first hand, is irrational until we look at the health risks associated with mice and rats.

Mice and, particularly, rats are feared because of the health risks. The most famous type of disease that is carried by rats is the plague. Although there hasn't been an outbreak of plague in the United States since 1924, it is possible for any rat to contract the bubonic plague. As most people are aware, plague is not caused by rats, but by lice that rats carry. In fact, lice that are not carriers of plague are relatively harmless. Moreover, plague is a bacterium that lice carry that rats become infected with, causing us to place the blame of plague on rats. For our purposes identifying rats as the plague carriers is useful because if we eliminate rats, then we can eliminate plague.

There are problems with this causal story. Alan Garfinkel argues in "The Ethics of Explanation" that when one identifies a cause it is inherently value laden. He makes the case that cause-identifiers attempt to identify a cause they can control, but that, in fact, they really identify a cause that minimizes their responsibility to the situation:

> In certain cases the principle "Select as the cause those things over which you have control" is replaced by "Minimize you own role in all this by selecting as the cause those things over which you do not have control. The standard accounts of causal selection do not acknowledge this inversion of practicality. But it is clear enough that it happens. (Ibid, 278)

He continues to lambaste causal explanations by acknowledging that identifying a cause is really only identifying a partial cause:

> Consequently, if the "scientific" premise, the statement "A causes B" is a statement of partial causality and cites only some of the causal factors, the whole syllogism will suffer. In such a case, drawing the conclusion "avoid A" from the premises "A causes B" and "B is undesirable" is simply fallacious. (Ibid., 279)

Because it is practical and useful to identify rats as the carries of plagues, we are able to justify their extermination and neglect our role in creating/harboring vermin. Our blame of vermin, particularly rats, is a misplaced causal story, as the example above shows. However, given that our causal explanation is only partial and that it fails to acknowledge our responsibility in creating congenial atmospheres for plague carrying vermin, it is true that it is probably near impossible to eliminate lice from rats without eliminating the rats. Yet, this objection misses the point. We probably cannot eliminate the lice, or the disease, but we can employ different methods of containing rats other than extermination.

A logical extension of this causal story, however, will show that there is a problem in misplacing disease causality. For example, in the 1980's it was the case that homosexuals and drug-addicts were more likely to contract the HIV/AIDs than non-

homosexuals and non-needle-using drug users. At that point in our society, snide remarks were made about exterminating homosexuals and drug-addicts like vermin to stop the spread of the disease because we were able to identify the cause of HIV/AID as 'partaking in deviant behavior.' (NB: the slang use of vermin has been applied to people who are 'parasites on society' or something of that sort.) Furthermore, if, as a society, we had deemed it appropriate to exterminate homosexuals and needle-using drug addicts because of their proneness to contract HIV/AIDs, like we have exterminated rats, it may have been possible to stop the spread of AIDs (in America) before the AIDs epidemic of the 1990's began, but I highly doubt it and this approach that seems ethically wrong. A critical reader will aptly point out that this argument is a bit of a red-herring: there are other diseases that rats carry that are problematic for humans, and that logical extension to humans, especially to humans who choose a certain life-style whereas rats do not choose, is not accurate. The second objection may have an element of truth, but the purpose is to show that there could be alternative ways to stopping or curtailing a disease or potential epidemic without having to eliminate the individuals. If we had identified the cause of HIV/AIDs as unsafe drug and sexual behavior, instead of labeling and identifying the cause as a deviant lifestyle, we probably would have been able to curtail the explosion of HIV/AIDs in the 1990's which has not been contained to those 'deviant lifestyles'.

The first objection to this example, that there are other diseases carried by rats, is absolutely true: rat-bite fever, leptospirosis, salmonellosis, trichinosis, murine typhus fever, rickettsialpox, and others are all diseases carried by rats. Most of these diseases are non-fatal, easily treatable, and carried by other animals that we are in continual

contact with. While there are these many diseases that rats carry, it does not follow that the only method for preventing disease is extermination, especially since many of these diseases are easily treated. Additionally, extermination may be the cheapest, but it may not be the most efficacious, which will be discussed in the next section. To conclude, there are many HV's, rats being one among many, and there are many ways of preventing the spread of these diseases, but extermination is not the only means of prevention. While there are rationalizations for exterminating vermin, it seems that extermination is a cheap and lazy way of dealing with the problem. Extermination and other means of prevention will be discussed in the next section.

Alternative Methods of Prevention

The U.S. department of Health, Education, and Welfare published a manual in the late 1960's citing numerous ways of dealing with rats and mice (rats and mice are not the only vermin, but they are the easiest to discuss and it is my hope that in discussing the most well-known, most feared, and the prevention methods, one could easily apply these or similar methods in dealing with other vermin). The manual contains an extensive section on the different types of poisons and exterminating procedures one could employ to exterminate vermin, but a considerable portion of the manual discusses ways to make homes, buildings, and farms inhospitable to vermin. Another smart book on ways to curtail vermin of all kinds is Adler's Outwitting Critters, mentioned above.

To limit vermin there are three main elements: the physical environment, predation, and competition. "The physical environment is comprised of three main elements: food and water, harborage, and climate…[however] man can reduce rodent populations and keep them low by permanently eliminating their food, water, and

harborage." (1970, 9) It should be obvious to any reader, that if we eliminate those things that vermin need, then we eliminate the vermin and thus the destruction and health risks they carry, without having to exterminate them. One could easily limit the food supply forcing vermin out of human homes by properly storing and disposing of refuse. This would entail keeping waste and usable food 12 to 18 inches off the ground in bins that lock or are impermeable to rats, compacting and covering landfills daily (what are called 'sanitary landfills'), blocking possible entrances to houses/farms, and using a garbage disposal in sinks only when necessary so as to reduce sewer rats. If rats and mice are already a problem in a house, Adler suggests using ultrasonic devices that create sonic stress for rodents, making your home inhospitable to them. He says, "there are many on the market, and manufacturers of most of them claim the gadgets will drive the animals from your home." (Ibid, 160) He lists several problems with these devices, but also lists technological advances that remedy those problems.

These are viable methods for reducing vermin, which in turn, reduces health risks and destruction. These methods are preferable to extermination in most cases. The only case where extermination may be plausible would be one in which the animals in question have completely overrun an area of a building rendering it inhabitable and non-salvageable. Even then, it may be possible to destroy the building while employing some method of making the land inhospitable to vermin. Additionally, the ways in which we use poisons and rodenticides are often problematic. The rodent control manual states, "Controlling rat populations, not individual rats, is the key to a successful rodent-control program in a community." (1970, 9) This would mean that it would take sizeable amounts of poisons or rodenticides to eliminate a rat population. This would be

potentially dangerous for other animals that we care about: cats, dogs, and small children to name a few. Not only that, in employing exterminating programs, we potentially introduce toxins into our own waterways and food sources. In essence, the easiest way, extermination, creates problem for other animals including humans, and individual traps do not help reduce the vermin population to any significant degree. To conclude, the jump from identifying a vermin to exterminating a vermin is an easy way out, but in the long run will create more problems and not necessarily fix the problem.

An example from Time magazine illustrates this problem. In Mammoth Lakes, CA, a small ski-resort town, restaurant owners began leaving their dumpsters open so tourists would be able to see real, live, wild black bears. What the people of Mammoth Lakes did not initially realize was that if you create a hospitable atmosphere for any animal *cum* vermin, they will stay. The black bears settled into abandoned homes and began having cubs and soon the town was overrun with black bear. The normal response to such situations, *as per* Rocky Mountain National Park, is to kill any bear that has tasted human food because if they have tasted it once they will come back for more and they are a potential threat to campers, hikers, and mountain enthusiasts. But instead of disposing of the bears in the normal, extremist way, the town contracted Steve Searles, a local resident, to rid the town without severely injuring or doing harm to the bears. Searles spent a year observing the bears in their new habitat and then formulated a plan.

> His plan was to mix dominance, territorial marking and the animals' fear of confrontation to become, he explained to officials, the city's "baddest bear." Soon he began chasing bears from basements and out of school yards with rubber bullets, pepper spray and pistol-loaded screamer rockets. He shouted threats so each bear remembered him. After a bear left a house, Searles marked the den as off limits by sprinkling it with his own urine. (1998)

Not too surprisingly, this method worked. By learning about how the bears operated, Searles was able to significantly reduce the bear population, by making the town less hospitable to them.

Metaphysical Implications

As I hope to have shown, vermin is a term that is used vaguely by most people and one of the most common responses is to call an exterminator, which is usually the result of poor rationalizing and laziness. In addition, I have shown that there are ways of thinking about different types of vermin – DV/HV distinction. I have also implicitly discussed the causes of vermin – poor maintenance of surrounding areas creating hospitable living and breeding zones, over population, the elimination of predators, and others. I have shown that all the causes of vermin stem from human interference or disturbance of a 'natural' state. We have named an entire class of animals that qualify as vermin, and have created cordial places for them to live. What I mean, is that outside of human society/civilization there is not an animal that is vermin. Unlike horses, which would still exist as horses regardless of humans, albeit slightly different from breeding, there exists, independently of the human name for them, some sort of animal that has a life, which we call 'horse'. There is no animal that is 'vermin.' In turn, vermin is a non-natural category of animals.

In discussing natural versus non-natural, I defined 'non-natural' in the following way: a non-natural state is one in which it could not have arisen without human or some sort of intelligent being interfering in some way. A holistic objection, roughly sketched above, would be that everything is natural, including human interference, thus everything would have to be non-natural. A theological objection would be that some sort of

intelligent being created everything. Neither of these objections is detrimental to this discussion. In the former, this holist ignores the way in which I am limiting natural, and although this may not be fair to a holist, there is probably not any other way in discussing the problem of vermin seriously. It may be the case that there is nothing that now lives outside the realm of human interference, but we can imagine untainted ecosystems or a world in which humans had not interfered and this is what I name 'natural.' In response to the theological objection, I cannot respond on such terms because it is not founded on empirical data and conflates the meaning of 'intelligent being', thus I dismiss it.

Annabelle Sabloff in her book Reordering the Natural World would object that there is nature inside the places that I have defined as non-natural, which at first glance seems to negate my position. She states, "Urban life is inimical to nature, people would say sadly, or angrily, or with resignation. Yet nature, almost universally defined by my respondents as nonhuman living beings, is in fact everywhere woven into the fabric of the city." (Ibid, 5) I believe she is entirely correct – nature is found everywhere, and there is a biotic community in every space on earth – but this does not negate my stance. While there is nature, a biotic community of some sort in every space, it does not follow that cities and places that people do not think of as nature are natural, as I defined it. The way in which Sabloff uses 'nature' is in a more holistic sense, while the way that I'm using natural and non-natural depends on human influence.

In creating a non-natural category of animal called vermin, and creating a way for them to live, humans have systemically created a faction of living creatures that does not have a natural ontological status. That is, there is no place in the 'natural world', outside the realm of human interference, in which there exists something that is a true vermin

(note: vermin is different from parasite). I assume that because vermin do not have a natural ontological status, we have been able to deny that they have value: when one spots a deer in its natural setting one is awed by its splendid and 'inherent' beauty. But when one spots a herd of deer eating one's garden, one is able to ignore their splendor and beauty and replace it with annoyance and vermin status; in turn, it becomes permissible to not only place a fence around the garden (deny their right to forage for food, which seems a tolerable action), but to justify hunting and killing them because they are a nuisance or over-populated.

In creating a faction of animals that we attribute a non-natural ontological status coupled with the idea that animals are outside the realm of moral consideration, we deny that we have any responsibility to them. This creates ethical issues that will be addressed in the next section.

Ethical Problems with Vermin

Including Vermin

Tom Reagan, Bernard Rollin, Peter Singer and many others have argued for the admission of animals into the realm of moral consideration. Unlike Singer and Reagan, Rollin argues that humans ought to take into consideration the *telos* of the animals when we use them for our purposes. That is, we ought to consider what their 'natural' inclinations, predispositions and tendencies are, in how we treat/use them. He makes the argument that our belief structure already allows that animals deserve moral consideration and that excluding them from the realm of moral consideration is logically inconsistent. He states,

> I cannot force my ideal, however, polished and articulate on you. I can, however, attempt to show you that you are already committed to that ideal by virtue of certain assumptions you already hold, and thereby show you that the ideal I am pressing upon you is in fact a consequence of beliefs you yourself entertain. (Ibid, 25)

However, Rollin and others have focused mainly on research animals and animals used in research. Many others have discussed invasive species or other unwanted animals, including unwanted pets. Our topic, vermin, has been largely ignored for various reasons. Chiefly, vermin is a colloquial word that has been replaced by other, more technical terms that are admissible to the philosophical or scientific disciplines, such as invasive species. Yet, the words that have been used in these traditions do not connote the same as vermin, which I have shown. However, the arguments put forth by Rollin and others have allowed a forum for a serious discussion about vermin by showing that animals, even unwanted, ugly, annoying, and problematic animals, deserve moral consideration. I have shown that there is the issue of misappropriated causality, a culturally dislike of vermin that may not be soundly reasoned (see next paragraph), and a non-natural ontological status all of which enable an extremist attitude (i.e. extermination) in dealing with vermin when there are suitable and practical preventative measures. Furthermore, taking the extremist stance is logically inconsistent with the general social attitude towards animals.

We have neglected to include vermin as animals that deserve moral consideration because the rationalizations *seem* well considered, but for the most part, are poorly misinformed and/or reasoned. The purpose is not to advocate living harmoniously with animals that can cause terrible economic and ecological destruction and health problems. Rather, I advocate looking at the way in which we treat vermin and possible alternatives

that are logically consistent with the ethical values we hold about animals. After all, pets, which we love dearly and consider members of the family, are prone to diseases and destruction, but we do not and ought not destroy them when they become sick. The question becomes, ought we include vermin in the realm of moral consideration? This question has already been implicitly answered affirmatively. Rollin also argues that animals we have used and or created for our purposes (lab rats, research animals, and agricultural animals) deserve moral consideration in virtue of the fact that they are contingent on our systems of breeding and living – or what I have dubbed non-natural ontological status. This holds true for vermin. The question then becomes: since we have created them, do we have responsibility to their telos? Again, the answer is confirmatory. This suggests we ought to find either new alternative means for the vermin problem or employ the alternative approaches I have outlines in the section entitled 'Alternative Methods of Prevention'

Another Route – Conclusion

I realize that many people have a visceral reaction against vermin and that this paper may seem too radical, and thus this paper may have fallen on deaf ears. I have tried to articulate that vermin can be dangerous if given the opportunity, but the way in which we deal with vermin, by excluding them from the realm of moral consideration through a misinformed rationalization process and immediately employing the last-resort by calling the exterminator, is inconsistent with the ethical consideration we have begun to delegate to other animals. After all, if we should exterminate all potentially dangerous animals, like vermin, we can extend it to other animals. The last part of this essay will hopefully

resonate with those people who feel I am being too radical when it comes to the problems of vermin.

If we do not feel as though we should include vermin because the rationalized reasons provide enough of a basis for extermination, then it follows that we can logically extend the criteria of animal-vermin to human-vermin. This means that the slang use of vermin applied to humans must be entertained seriously.

What types of people can qualify as vermin? Because vermin is vaguely defined, even though it has been refined for this paper, it can be widely applied. A vermin can be destructive in an economic and ecological way, but can also be a health risk. When this criteria is applied to humans, vermin-hood is applied on a culturally sensitive basis: for the Jews of Israel the Palestinians and vermin, for the Palestinians and the Arab Nation the Jews are vermin, for American pre-civil rights era blacks and minorities, for the established families in the newly established United States of America, circa 1820, the Irish, and for contemporary Americans the most likely candidate is the homeless.

The homeless are perfect candidates for vermin-hood because they are a drain on our economy and pose health risks, not only to themselves but also to others who are daring enough to walk within close proximity. Additionally, homelessness is a good topic for discussion and argument from analogy, because homelessness is worldwide problem, which makes it less culturally sensitive than targeting Jews or blacks. Most Americans do not treat the homeless like vermin - in many cases we treat them better than vermin. We have shelters and rehabilitation programs and most importantly we do not advocate exterminating them. Ought we? It would seem that if we have no quarrels with exterminating animal-vermin then we should not have any problem exterminating

human-vermin because they fit all the criteria. The only difference is that they are human, and thus in the realm of moral consideration. But if we must extend moral consideration to animals because the rationalizations for keeping them separate are unconvincing to a well-informed, well-reasoning person, then we must extend moral consideration to vermin. If this is not suitable, then we must extend vermin-hood to humans, specifically it ought not seem morally abhorrent to exterminate the homeless.

Exterminating the homeless is morally abhorrent and this is why we have alternative means for prevention and rehabilitation. It follows that we should be willing to find alternative methods for dealing with vermin! There are three potential underlying problems – there is a problem with exterminating vermin, there is a problem with not exterminating those that fit criteria of vermin, or there is a problem with the logical extension from humans to animals and animals to humans. I cannot formulate a good argument against the logical extension from humans to animals and thus I cannot formulate a good argument from animals to humans, unless one is willing to say that humans are fundamentally different from animals, which negates extending morals consideration to animals, which has been roundly rejected by many. I cannot retain a good consciousness by advocating that we should treat some humans, those who fit the criteria, as expendable. The only reasonable thing to say is that there is a better, more logically and ethically consistent way of treating those animals we have christened vermin.

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