Disentangling Obligations of Assistance

A Reply to Clare Palmer's "Against the View That We Are Usually Required to Assist Wild Animals"

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Animals are sentient individuals. They can be harmed and benefited by what happens to them. A significant number of nonhuman animals live under human control, yet the overwhelming majority of them live in the wild (Tomasik 2014). Many of the harms wild animals endure are due to natural events, rather than to human agency. Given the means at our disposal, wild animal suffering could be, to some extent, prevented or, at least, alleviated. This raises the question of whether we are morally required to intervene in nature to assist them or, alternatively, whether we may permissibly choose not to.

Clare Palmer is one of the few philosophers who directly tackles this problem [1], answering it from the relational account of the moral consideration of nonhuman animals which she has developed (2010, 2013, 2015). As it can be surmised from her contribution to this issue, her claim is that we are not usually required to assist wild animals. However, we may be permitted to do so. This thesis relies on two premises:

(i) we are morally required to assist others in need *if, and only if*, we have a prior *morally-relevant entanglement* with them;

(ii) usually, there are no such morally-relevant entanglements between human beings and wild animals.

Palmer's default position is, thus, that we lack general obligations to help others. Instead, we merely have special obligations of assistance towards those individuals with whom we have morally-relevant entanglements. It is the existence of such entanglements what generates obligations

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[1] Some salient exceptions are Sapontzis 1987; Cowen 2003; McMahan 2010; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Horta 2013.

of assistance. Since human beings and wild animals usually do not maintain these morally relevant relationships, helping them is merely permitted, as opposed to morally required. And we may decide to exercise that permission by refraining to assist them. In what follows, I will assess Palmer's argument and discuss whether this is indeed the case. In Palmer's view,

> *Prior morally-relevant entanglement* refers to any causal relation between an individual's particular situation of exposure to a harm (which generates the need of aid) and past human action.

Domesticated animals are a paradigmatic example of this. As she points out:

> […] where humans have deliberately created relations of dependent vulnerability with animals (especially where this involves prior harms, such as wild capture), special obligations to care for these animals, and to assist them, are also created. (2015)

That is, we are required to prevent or alleviate the suffering of domesticated animals because we deliberately put them in a situation of vulnerability and dependence. If the argument is sound, it allows Palmer to establish a morally relevant difference between domesticated animals and those living in the wild, in spite of their having similar morally relevant capacities (equal capacity to suffer and enjoy their lives).

Palmer draws on a human analogue for support: the case of parents' special obligations towards their own children. Even though all children have similar morally relevant capacities, she claims, we only have special obligations to assist our own, since we are in some way responsible for putting them in a situation of vulnerability, by having brought them into existence. Likewise, despite their similar levels of suffering, we have only special obligations towards the animals we have deliberately made dependent and vulnerable through domestication – those within our "contact-zone". In sum, we should assist domesticated animals (but not those living in the wild) not merely because their well-being is threatened by some harmful event, but because we are responsible for making them vulnerable to that threat.

However, the analogy does not prove as much as it intends. Even conceding that parents have special obligations towards their own children, it does not follow that they do not have reasons to assist other children in need. It might simply be that their reasons to assist their own children are stronger than those to assist other people's children. In fact, most people would consider it impermissible not to assist a child, let's say, dying of malaria, if we could otherwise help her, on the grounds that we are not responsible for making her vulnerable to that disease. If this is so, then

even if it were right that our reasons to assist domesticated animals were stronger than our reasons to assist wild animals, it would still be unjustified to fail to assist animals in the wild.

Thus, this argument from analogy cannot ground Palmer's strong view that obligations to assist individuals in need only arise from prior morally-relevant entanglements. She seems to be aware of this alternative to her view when elsewhere she claims:

> There might be a different version of this view – that requirements to assist do exist in such cases but that they are much weaker where there's no prior entanglement; however, I don't have space to develop such a view here. (2013, 29)

However, the latter would not merely be a different version of Palmer's view but a completely different one. And this weak relational thesis is, indeed, the one that most plausibly follows from Palmer's arguments.

If we, nevertheless, focus on her stronger thesis, immediate worries arise in its application to the human case, as Palmer herself acknowledges. In particular, if our reasons to assist other individuals are generated by a causal link between present suffering and previous human action, there seems to be no requirement to help distant human beings in need due to natural causes. If we have not made these human beings vulnerable to that harm (what is generally true of harms caused by natural events), we have no obligation to assist them. Palmer attempts to avoid this implication by further specifying her argument:

> […] the entanglements of human societies, in particular the social and structural connections between virtually all people, connections that benefit some while causing suffering to others, provide a basis for human obligations to assist other humans […]. (2015)

There are two plausible ways of understanding Palmer's answer to what generates these *special obligations* of assistance among human beings:

> *(i) Special obligations of assistance are generated by causal relations.*

That is, all harms that human beings suffer are directly or indirectly caused by the social and structural connections among human beings that benefit some while causing suffering to others.

But this seems highly implausible. First, it is not true of all harms. There are clear cases of harms that humans suffer whose cause cannot be traced back to human action. Paradigm examples of these are diseases, as well as natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, droughts, etc. If Palmer is right, we would have no obligation to help those humans in need suffering from these and similar natural events. Thus, it would be

false that her account provides a basis for human obligations to assist other humans in need.

One might say against this that there is a relevant difference between both cases, since the humans that suffer the harms belong to the same network of relevant connections as those humans whose actions are partly responsible for the harms, whereas wild animals do not. However, that reply would be misguided in two different ways. First, if an individual is harmed by an action, then that individual immediately enters into the relevant network of connections with the agent. To accept this when the victims are human and denying it when the victims are nonhuman would be an instance of speciesism, an unjustified form of discrimination (Horta 2010a). Second, let us suppose that the relevant connections that allegedly hold among human beings, and which ground special obligations among them, are not causal in the latter sense but, instead, refer to certain other kinds of relations, which hold between individual human beings, such as:

> […] mutually recognized communication, the ability of humans to justify themselves to others, reciprocity in economic relations, mutual cooperation, the joint organization of political and other institutions, membership of political communities, the sense of a political "world order", and membership in families. (Palmer 2010, 121)

If that were the case, then special obligations to assist would not arise towards all human beings either. That is because those human beings who fail to engage in the aforementioned relations would be excluded. It is clearly the case that some human individuals, by virtue of their functional diversity or other circumstances, do not engage into "mutual communication". Nor do they reciprocate or enter into any political, economic or familial relations. Hence, we would also lack any obligations to assist them, even if it were in our power to do so. Thus, unless Palmer accepts that we lack the obligation to assist human beings that do not satisfy these conditions, her argument does not provide a sound basis for excluding nonhuman animals from the scope of those obligations (e.g., wild animals).

Let us then consider a different way of understanding her view about what generates these special obligations and let us see to what extent it might accomplish that goal.

(ii) Special obligations of assistance are generated by equality-reasons.

That is, the social and structural connections among human beings make some worse-off than others. This gives us equality-based reasons to alleviate the harms of the worse-off human individuals, even when these are not directly or indirectly caused by the social and structural connections among human beings. Such is the case of natural harms.

Of course, in order for the argument to succeed in showing the existence of differential obligations towards human beings and nonhuman animals in similar circumstances, it would have to be the case that nonhuman animals are justifiably excluded from the scope of equality. Otherwise, the harms that animals suffer in the wild should also be considered in comparative terms. There are, as a matter of fact, sound reasons to believe this is indeed the case. If equality applies to all those individuals whose lives can go well or badly, then it applies to all sentient beings. Since most nonhuman animals are sentient (hence, their lives can go well or badly) excluding them from the scope of equality is unjustified (Persson 1993; Holtug 2007; Faria 2013). In addition, when compared to most humans, nonhuman animals are the worse-off. This is particularly true of animals that live in the wild, whose lives are, in general, not even barely worth living, as they contain more suffering than positive well-being (I will return to this point below). Thus, when understood in comparative terms, Palmer's argument, instead of grounding a permission not to assist animals in the wild, actually furnishes a requirement to help them with the aim of equalizing their very low levels of well-being with those of human beings.

One might say, again, that equality reasons only arise among individuals who are entangled in morally-relevant ways and that animals that live in the wild fail to do so. However, that would beg the question, as it would take us back to the problem discussed in the previous section regarding the assistance to those humans who do not enter into such alleged morally-relevant entanglements, and who most of us believe we are required to assist.

Moreover, the moral relevance of these entanglements in establishing obligations of assistance can be questioned altogether. Assuming that it were feasible to help those individuals without jeopardizing similarly weighty interests, we ought to provide them with the assistance they need. This is so because the cause of the harm that individuals suffer does not affect the weight of their interests in not being harmed. For example, the interest in not suffering from a leg injury inflicted by another human is, all things being equal, as strong as the interest in not suffering from a similar injury caused by the fall of a tree. Thus, if human interests in avoiding suffering and in living their lives are relevant independently of other considerations, and if those interests are equally weighty independently of who or what frustrates them, taking them into account requires two different courses of action. First, it requires that we refrain from harming these individuals. Second, it requires that we prevent them from being harmed by other events or that we alleviate unavoidable harms they endure (e.g., by preventing their deaths or by reducing their suffering). Thus, it would

be unjustified not to act according to either way of accounting for other individuals' interests, whenever it is in our power to do so.

This can be clearly observed in the following scenario. Suppose that you are presented with these choices:

(i) press button A: all human beings are immunized against all lethal forms of cancer;
(ii) press button B: only those human beings with whom we are engaged in "morally-relevant entanglements" are so immunized;
(iii) press no button.

Palmer's view would imply that we are morally required to press B, while we may permissibly choose not to press A. This is because our special obligations of assistance are completely satisfied by pressing button B. However, most people would find this odd. Assume that the costs of pressing either button are the same. Also, more individuals are benefited when A is pressed than when B is. So it seems that any view that does not require an agent to benefit others even when that comes at no cost, not even to the agent herself, is hardly acceptable. Of course, in real world cases, helping always bears a cost for the agent or for others. Yet this scenario does not aim to show that we should not take costs into account when deciding whether we should help others. That must indeed be taken into account. What this scenario does show is that we are required to help others even if we are not relevantly entangled with them in the ways specified by Palmer.

Now, suppose that it were feasible, and had similarly low costs, to help a wild animal population, say, by rescuing it from a flood or by vaccinating it against an extremely painful disease. Failing to so would constitute a similar disregard of their interests. Such as in the human case, what generates an obligation to help these nonhuman individuals is the importance of their well-being, the extent to which it is threatened by some event and our possibility to intervene in order to help them without causing a greater harm.

Against this it could be argued that intervening in nature to help wild animals would then be morally required only when it had a low cost. It would not be required, however, when the cost is non-negligible. There is a way, though, to dispute this argument. A number of consequentialist views disagree with this position. There are other positions, nevertheless, which do accept that intervening to aid others at some non-negligible cost is merely supererogatory, unless the situation in which others are is a catastrophic one. Yet, in those cases in which not intervening will bring about that others suffer a truly enormous amount of harm, and in which the cost of intervention can be afforded, even these views accept that tradeoffs are necessary and that therefore, intervention can no longer be considered supererogatory but required.

In this regard, when deciding whether we should help wild animals, the magnitude of the harms they suffer is usually underestimated. Most animals that live in the wild are what has been traditionally called "*r*-strategists", that is, they follow the reproductive strategy that consists in maximizing reproductive fitness through the maximization of offspring. This entails an extremely low survival rate, with most individuals dying before they reach sexual maturity, and leading gruesome short lives (Pianka 1970). As some have argued extensively, it is highly probable that their lives contain much more suffering than well-being, which, on aggregate, makes suffering largely predominant over well-being in nature (Ng 1995; Horta 2010b and 2013; Tomasik [2009] 2014). These facts are crucial since once we have questioned the relevance of the kind of entanglements Palmer specifies, the most important factors to take into account when deciding whether or not to assist others, as I mentioned before, have to do with how much they can be benefited and at what cost. Given the magnitude of wild animal suffering, usually the costs of intervening in order to help them will be significantly smaller than the benefit they may receive. That is what generates our moral obligation to assist them, in a way that can be accepted not only by consequentialist views but also from many non-consequentialist perspectives.

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