

Parents of “Pets?” A Defense of Interspecies Parenting and Family Building

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Abstract: In this paper, I advance the position that some relationships between human caregivers and their non-human companion animals ought to be thought of (and treated as) instances of parenting. Parenting non-human animals shares many of the same features as parenting human children, including similar (although not identical) rights, responsibilities, rewards, and challenges. I argue for increased visibility, recognition, and respect of this form of parenting, and draw out some of the moral and practical implications of doing so. Finally, I discuss challenges to my view, and ultimately argue that despite these potential objections, we still have significant reasons to value this particular form of parenting on par with other parenting arrangements.

Keywords: love, family, parenting, interspecies relationships.

For many women without children, the invasive line of questioning of “Why don’t you have kids yet?” and “When are you going to have them?” is probably all too familiar. Childless or child-free¹ women who are perceived to be of child-bearing age are often subjected to these awkward intrusions into their personal lives and decision-making processes.² Packed into this common line of questioning are all sorts of assumptions about “real” womanhood and the essential

¹ I use “childless” to refer to someone who may desire to have children, but does not yet have them, perhaps because they are experiencing fertility difficulties or are otherwise physically unable to have children at this time. I use “child-free” to refer to someone who is childless by choice—someone who is not, and does not want to be, a parent to a human child. It is important to note the potentially ageist and ableist assumptions inherent in this line of questioning, whereby even strangers make rapid assumptions about their interlocutor’s relative age and reproductive capacities based on outward appearance and/or presentation.

² I focus here on those who are perceived to be of child-bearing age and otherwise capable of bearing children, and the line of questioning they are likely to face as a result of not having human children. However, I also want to acknowledge the equally invasive line of questioning often faced by older women who do not have children, namely questions around whether they are lonely, have regrets about not having had children, and so on. These are equally problematic lines of questioning, rooted in the same gendered assumptions about the role of women and the value of childbearing.



link between *being a woman* and *being a mother*. In a largely heteronormative society with rigid gender norms, it is often taken for granted that being a mother is not only an important social role of women, but it is part of what it means to *be* a woman and to *flourish* as such (Leskosek 2011, Meyers 2001). Women without children are often looked at as objects of pity: there must be something wrong with them, and it is unfortunate that they are missing out on the joys of motherhood, something which would surely imbue their life with meaning and value (Day 2016, Walker 2011). As Stephanie Wood (2016) describes,

[t]he dominant culture celebrates [only] two roles for women, each a function of female physicality: the desirable young woman and the mother. The drumbeat of the tribe wills me to believe that, even in the 21st century, I'm something other: selfish, empty, meaningless. On melancholic days, it's not hard to see myself as the incredible disappearing woman, an outlier. I feel the sting of the suffix: childless. Less. Less of a person, it seems to say sometimes, a life that's less.

Feminist scholars and activists have pushed back against the problematic gendered assumptions that permeate this “casual” questioning routinely experienced by women without children. For instance, Jenny Kutner (2015) has argued that when we ask women why they don’t have children, what we really want to know is “What is *wrong* with you?” “In a culture that glorifies motherhood,” Kutner writes, “asking a woman why she doesn’t have kids is almost always a loaded question.” Though of course, as Gloria Steinem has pointed out, it is just as silly to assume that everyone with a womb needs to have a child as it is to assume that everyone with vocal cords needs to be an opera singer, nonetheless the pervasive normative assumptions remain firmly intact (Steinem quoted in Kutner 2015).

While feminist scholars and critics have challenged the gendered and heteronormative assumptions implied in these sorts of questions, in this paper I want to draw attention to yet another underlying assumption present in this sort of questioning, which has not yet been sufficiently attended to or adequately problematized in the literature. The assumption that I want to challenge is that human parenting is always necessarily directed at a *human* child or children. Instead, I suggest that it is reasonable and coherent for people to consider themselves parents, in a morally meaningful way, even if it is not human children that they parent. To this end, in this paper I argue that the meaningful caring relationships and deep bonds of love that some humans can develop

with some non-human companion animals³ can mirror—and be on a moral par with—the parental bonds shared between human parents and their human children.⁴ It is possible for these bonds between humans and their non-human companions to be the most morally salient relationships in some people’s lives, and thus the moral significance of these relationships needs to be better analyzed and understood. Doing so not only highlights one important reason why directing questions such as “Why are you not a parent yet?” at those who care for non-human animals is disrespectful and fails to adequately understand their lived experience, but it also has implications for how we treat these particular caring relationships in the social and political sphere.

In section I, I will set the stage for my argument by showing that keeping companion animals in our homes is morally justifiable, despite arguments to the contrary. In section II, I offer a general analysis of the reasons why parenting is viewed as having the special sort of status and esteem that it does. My aim here is to break down some of the dominant norms regarding *who* can participate in parenting, and which relationship constellations count as family structures. After this, I turn in section III to my argument for what I call “interspecies parenting.” I argue that, in certain contexts, it is justifiable to talk about the bonds between humans and their non-human companions as mirroring human/child parental bonds, or as sharing the morally relevant features of those relationships. On account of this, the paper aims to show that it is entirely reasonable for humans participating in these relationships to see themselves as parents, and to desire to be recognized as such by others. I draw out several moral and practical implications of my view in section IV. I address some potential objections to my view in section V, and ultimately defend the moral and political significance of recognizing this form of parenting as legitimate and morally valuable, despite these possible objections.

Before moving forward, a point of clarification is in order with respect to my argumentative scope. In what follows, I restrict my analysis and the arguments advanced to an examination of human caregiving relations with particular species of animals. Namely, I focus on caregiving relations with cats and dogs exclusively. In so doing, I do not intend to preclude the possibility of equally meaningful bonds with other non-human animal species. To the contrary, I think humans

³ Following Harvey 2017, I use “companion animals” to refer to those animals who live in a “home setting” with humans at least most of the time (Harvey 2017, 4).

⁴ For an account of the reciprocal relation of love between humans and their non-human companions (i.e., dogs, cats, horses), and the moral significance of such relations, see Gheaus 2012.

can (and often do) have morally significant relationships with the many other animals that tend to live in close proximity with them, including but not limited to pigs, horses, rabbits, snakes, rats, and many other non-human species that offer companionship to humans. I want to be clear that it is not my intention to discount or minimize the moral significance of those bonds. Rather, I restrict my scope here to a focus on cats and dogs for several pragmatic reasons.

Firstly, I take cats and dogs to be paradigmatic representatives of companion animals with which humans often live and cultivate meaningful bonds of the sort I want to examine and argue in defense of. Data collected in 2012 by the American Veterinary Medical Foundation found that in the United States, 36.5% of households report having one or more dogs, and 30.4% report having one or more cats. This is quite significant compared to the other two companion animals counted, including birds (3.1% of households) and horses (1.5% of households). In considering humans who have companionship with cats and dogs exclusively, I am likely speaking about a much larger demographic than I would be with other companion animal species. Secondly, cats and dogs seem to be uniquely subjected to the scrutiny of “captivity” objections, as well as domestication arguments, both of which my argument needs to respond to sufficiently (objections which I take up in sections I and V respectively). Finally, the restriction I have chosen is pragmatic, insofar as the literature I am in dialogue with makes similar restrictions in scope: Harvey 2017 restricts her scope to cats and dogs given her personal location and background, and Norlock 2017 restricts her focus to cats and dogs because she thinks Harvey 2017 makes a compelling case that dogs and cats have unique and morally important capacities for love and loyalty to their human companions (see also Gheaus 2012). For these reasons, for the remainder of the paper, the category of non-human companion animals is taken to refer to cats and dogs exclusively.

I. Companion Animals in Our Homes: A Moral Defense

Some philosophers have argued that keeping non-human animals such as cats and dogs “captive” in our homes for our own benefit is always already an immoral act, insofar as we are denying these animals something inherent to their nature, such as their ability to live in the wild, hunt prey, and freely move about an unrestricted environment.⁵ What I think this line of argument

⁵ For representative articulations of “captivity” arguments against domesticated animals, see for example Gruen 2011, Gruen 2014, and Horowitz 2014.

generally misses is an adequate sensitivity to both history and context. If we concede to this view that it was immoral to domesticate certain animals in the first place, we have to reconcile this past (potential) moral failure with the position we find ourselves in in the present. The reality is that in the here and now, we have animals which (by our own doing) have become dependent on us for food, shelter, and companionship. Domesticating animals, whether or not that was the right thing to do in the past, has given rise to animals with *different natures* in the present—cats and dogs which now rely on humans, and also form significant bonds with them.⁶ Removing cats and dogs from our home environments now, given this history of domestication and the resulting changes in their natures to live in close proximity with humans, would also be a moral wrong to the extent that these animals also gain something valuable from living in accordance with their present, evolved natures. And a moral wrong in the present does not undo a moral wrong of the past.

Not only would removing cats and dogs from our homes and our lives be a morally wrong thing to do at this point, it would also be impossible to give them the sorts of lives we think they would have had without domestication. Human beings have urbanized much of the space that would have allowed cats and dogs the possibility to live “in the wild.” The sad reality is that there isn’t much untouched “wild” or “natural” space to be found (Lebetkin 2014). Releasing cats and dogs into largely urbanized spaces, with the thought that it would give them the opportunity to live, hunt, and roam freely, relies on the false assumption that human activity hasn’t radically reshaped the natural environment in ways that have also impeded the ability of animals to enjoy their “natural” habitats and live in accordance with their undomesticated natures. It doesn’t follow from this point, however, that domesticated animals – in their presently evolved state – have ceased to have morally valuable lives worth living. To the contrary, the lives which these animals are now able to have, which ideally involve socialization and play with human and non-human others, can justify continuing to support and provide care to these animals, regardless of the possibility that their domestication was morally problematic in the first place.

While human beings surely receive benefits from living in close proximity with animals such as cats and dogs, that doesn’t make it the case that bringing these animals into our homes and

⁶ Jean Harvey (2017) makes the case that “thriving in a loving relationship with humans” has become part of cats’ and dogs’ telos, or nature (Harvey 2017, 1). Insofar as we are responsible for this evolved nature, humans now have the moral obligation to develop, nurture, respect, and protect the loving relations between humans and companion animals.

hearts is a purely self-interested act. At this point in history, when urbanization has reduced natural space, domestication has given rise to different natures in cats and dogs (involving socialization and contact with human beings). As human failures have led to overpopulation worries⁷, cats and dogs also have interests in coming into loving human homes. Our non-human companion animals, in light of social and historical realities, benefit from the sorts of lives human companions are positioned to be able to provide for them. To be sure, taking cats and dogs into our homes and lives in our present context does not entirely right the wrong(s) of the past. What it can do, however, is provide animals in the present with opportunities for meaningful lives moving forward.

II. What's So Special about Parenting, Anyway?

In this section, I will look at how “parenting” has been defined and commonly understood, and also briefly suggest ways in which feminist and queer scholarship has been challenging the boundaries and norms of parenting. Through the lens of queer understandings of loving relationships, bonds of intimacy, and family structures, I defend a more expansive view of *what makes a relationship count as a parenting relationship*, and why expanding this understanding matters morally. On my view, what makes one a parent is a combination of the *desire or intention* to be in the role of parent, paired with the *drive to do the work* of care and other labor that is required by such a role. In order to show why this understanding of parenting is coherent, let's first consider other possible definitions of parenthood.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers the following definitions of parenting: (1) the raising of a child by its parents; (2) the act or process of becoming a parent; and (3) taking care of someone in the manner of a parent (Merriam-Webster 2017). The first definition is not very helpful for our purposes, since it defines parenting as an act done by parents, without specifying who or what can count as a parent. What is interesting about the second definition is the emphasis on the process—parenting is a process of *becoming* a parent (though again, what counts as a “parent” is left open and unspecified). The third definition opens the door for the possibility of parenting

⁷ American Humane (<https://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/>) identifies the problem of companion animal overpopulation as encompassing two related problems: (1) allowing cats and dogs to reproduce with little chance of finding homes for the offspring, and (2) humans relinquishing their animals when they no longer can (or no longer want to) provide them care. As a result, millions of cats and dogs are euthanized in “kill shelters” when responsible homes are not found for them (American Humane 2016).

someone who one is not in the standard parental relation with, so long as it is done “in the manner of a parent.” Clearly, there is a lot to be unpacked with all three definitions, and each relies on some further understanding of the parental role or relationship. I merely use these definitions as a starting point to illustrate the inherent openness and fluidity of the concept itself, even if its social meaning, or common use, tends to construe it more narrowly.

The central question underlying attempts to define parenthood is this: “In virtue of what does one become a moral parent?” where a “moral parent” is one who bears parental rights and responsibilities with respect to a particular child. Elizabeth Brake and Joseph Millum (2016) have provided possible answers to this question, distinguishing four possible bases for “moral parenthood”: genetics-based, labor-based, intentional (or voluntarist), and causal accounts of parenthood, respectively.⁸ Genetic theories ground parenthood in the relation of direct genetic derivation. Such a view radically restricts parenthood to biological parents, and would thus exclude many relationships we commonly deem as parental, most notably adoptive or “step” parents who become parents to children by alternative means to biological reproduction, and who likely share no genetic material with the child in question. Labor-based accounts of parenthood, on the other hand, view parents’ work with and for children as the basis for their claim to parenthood, irrespective of genetics. On this view, people who play or have played a parental role in the child’s life become parents, where “parental role” just means doing the work associated with raising the children in question, providing care, and so on. The intentionalist view (also called the voluntarist view) grounds parenthood in one’s intentions—do they *intend* to bring a child into the world (i.e., by using technologies of assisted reproduction) or otherwise intend to enter into a parental relationship with the child (i.e., through adoption, customary care, or permanent kinship)? If so, then they become parents as a result of intending to be in that sort of relation. Lastly, some see parenthood as being grounded in causation. This view differs from the intentionalist view because it takes seriously that someone can causally bring something about without intending to do so, and possibly even in the absence of knowledge that they have in fact done so. More precisely, one could, for example, participate in the creation of a child without realizing their sexual actions could causally bring about a child. Furthermore, one could have participated in the creation of a child that they never find out has come into being (i.e., where someone is never notified that a pregnancy

⁸ There are also pluralist accounts, which ground moral parenthood in some combination of these. For the sake of simplicity, I will not explore all such possibilities here.

occurred after a one time sexual interaction, or a sperm donor who never finds out that their sperm was utilized in an artificial insemination). These four possibilities offer varying (and very different!) understandings of what is essential, or necessary, for one to gain the status of parent with respect to some particular child or set of children.

It is noteworthy that of the four possible grounds of moral parenthood, only the first grants the status of “parent” automatically. On this view, to the extent that one’s genes recombine with another’s to create a child, that person simply *is* a parent. As easily as parenthood is achieved on this view, it also seems impossible to be taken away. On this view, then, it seems that one can never cease to be a parent, even if they have no contact with the child or otherwise play no ongoing parental role in its life. This is counter-intuitive, since many people opt out of their parenting duties (i.e., give their children up for adoption, walk out on their children and permanently cease to have contact), and cease to see themselves as parents, and/or lose the legal status of parenthood. Furthermore, other people can take up the parental role in relation to another’s genetic child (i.e., through adoption or step-parenting relations). Any complete and coherent view of parenting needs to allow for both possibilities, and most importantly, for the recognition of the latter category (i.e., adoptive and step-parents) *as parents*.

The other three views of parenting can, in their own ways, account for this possibility. Each emphasizes the prospect of *becoming* a parent, through various processes including but not limited to intending to form such a relationship to the child (i.e., arranging for a surrogate birth), cultivating meaningful bonds over time, putting in the work of raising the child or giving them substantial care, and so on. These views create more space for the moral dimensions of parenthood (intentionality, responsibility, bonding, and care), and do not reduce parenthood to one’s genetic contributions to bringing a child about.

I take it that the most convincing view of parenting (that is, the one that is best able to account for the many and diverse relationships that we call parenting in common discourse) is some combination of the intentionalist view (that which grounds parenthood in the explicit intention to enter into and maintain such a relation) and the labor-based view (that which is grounded in the work one does toward meeting the needs of a child and providing them with care). While providing a full defense of the strengths of this view of parenting over the others is beyond the scope of this paper, it is easy to see the limits of views that restrict parenthood to just those cases in which one

has contributed in some causal way (either genetically, or through contributions to assisted reproduction) to bringing a child into being. Such views exclude many relationships that are commonly accepted as parenting, especially those which are formed through the process of adoption. To the extent that we do not want our theory of parenting to exclude much of what common sense views of parenting include, it makes sense to rule these out as plausible understandings on the grounds that they do not include all that they need to include – their scopes are hopelessly narrow.

The two remaining candidates – intentionalist and labor-based views—are both insufficient on their own, but when brought together they seem to capture what is morally salient in relations commonly understand as parental. The labor-based view is insufficient as a stand-alone view of parenting because one could do work towards meeting a child’s needs and not see their work as stemming from a distinctively parental relation (i.e., social workers, nurses or other health care providers, orphanage workers). Intentionalist views are also not enough on their own, since one could desire or intend to be a parent but fail to do the necessary work involved in caring for or meeting the needs of a child – needs that eventually end up needing to be met by other people. Combining these two views together results in an understanding of parenting that can capture both our common-sense understanding of parenting (i.e., does not preclude the possibility of adoptive parents) and helps make sense of the moral grounds of parenting (what is morally valuable about the parental relation). A parent need not contribute causally to the creation of a child to be recognized as the parent of that child, but rather must see themselves in that role, and subsequently do the necessary work to care and provide for that child. It is this combination of intention and work that makes parenting a morally significant relation.

This intentionalist/labor-based view is particularly attractive for my purposes, since a consequence of understanding parenting in this more expansive way is that it creates space for a variety of possible parental relationships beyond merely genetic ones. One can be a parent, on this view, regardless of biological connections to the child, so long as they intend to have this sort of relationship, and subsequently put in the necessary work to cultivate and sustain it. Such a view, then, allows for a cultural “queering” of parenting, that is, a deconstructing of the “ideal” normative family structure (a monogamous, heterosexual married couple with 2.5 kids, etc.) and opening parenting up to various forms of “postmodern” family (Park 2009). Some feminist scholars have

even argued that “queering” parenting is ultimately best for children, since marriage (and romantic love more generally) might be too fragile to serve as solid foundations (or indeed, the only socially respected foundations) for family (Brennan and Cameron 2015). If this is true, we would do better to disconnect child-rearing from its exclusionary normative ties to heterosexual marriage and biological reproduction, and instead shift parenting roles and responsibilities onto all those who desire the parental role and who aim to love, protect, and provide for the children in question.

Whatever parenting is (and I have argued that it is when one desires to be a parent and does the necessary work involved in caring for a child), and whoever we think has access to participate in it, there is no denying that there is substantial social value attached to parenting, and that the parent/child relationship is a significant one, socially and morally speaking. This is true both for the individual being parented (i.e., the one on the receiving end of the parental work), and, importantly for my purposes, for the one doing the parenting (i.e., the one doing the parental work).

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2014) argue that the parent-child relationship makes significant contributions to the well-being and flourishing of adult lives. They argue that the parent/child relationship is of particular social and moral importance, since it bestows goods on the parents’ lives that are not realizable in other relationships (of which they include relationships with pets). What is special about parenting on Brighouse & Swift’s view is that they think parent/child relations confront parents with a genuinely unique combination of joys, challenges, and demands that need to be met by the parent, and that are unlike those found in other intimate relationships. “The parent is charged with the responsibility for both the immediate wellbeing of the child, and the development of the child’s capacities” (Brighouse and Swift 2014). Children (read: human children) have both immediate interests in being kept safe, enjoying themselves, being sheltered and well nourished, having loving relationships with proximate others, etc., as well as long term interests in health, stability, and development.

Insofar as parenting is something that is given social status, and insofar as parenting is something that many people feel adds substantial value to their lives, it is important to recognize and appreciate parenting in its many diverse forms. While Brighouse and Swift explicitly deny that the caregiving of “pets” is worthy of the same status in our lives as that of human children, I will argue to the contrary that the sources of meaning and value attributed to the parent/child relationship extend to the parenting of companion animals. I will call this particular form of

parenting “interspecies parenting,” because the parenting relation is happening across species lines. Insofar as “interspecies parenting” is simply another instantiation of parenting, it is worthy of equal social and political recognition and respect, a consequence I will develop in section IV.

III. An Account of Interspecies Parenting

In this section I aim to make the case that under certain conditions of affection and care, we can think of the bonds between non-human companion animals and their human caregivers as distinctly *parental*. By this, I mean that these relationships can also share the same morally salient features of parenting that have been said in Section II above to imbue parents’ lives with meaning and which contribute to their flourishing. Many of the same rights (for instance, ultimate control over decision-making) and responsibilities (for instance, to provide shelter, food, and affectionate care) are all present in these relations, and the only substantial difference is the object at which they are directed, here being a cat or a dog as opposed to a human child. Furthermore, parents of non-human companion animals receive satisfaction and joy from similar moments and milestones: we are proud when our cat or dog socializes with others, listens and responds to us, learns new tricks or skills, and is overall happy, safe, and healthy. On the other hand, we experience similar degrees of disappointment when things don’t go as we planned: when our cat or dog gets into something they have been trained not to or acts aggressively with others. In both cases (raising humans or non-humans), we aim, as parents, to nurture, to offer love, and to watch the object of our care grow, develop, and live as long, healthy, and fulfilling a life as possible.

It is important to note that while all parents are likely to share in the desire to watch those who are under their care grow, develop, and successfully hit certain milestones, this is always going to be limited by the extent to which the latter are realistically able to do so, upon taking into account various features, including age, cognitive development, dis/ability status, and indeed, species. Similarly, the length of time parents can realistically expect those under their care to live is also subject to a variety of limitations and extenuating factors. Factors that limit parents’ expectations regarding what those under their care will be able to achieve or accomplish is not an exclusive feature of interspecies parenting. Rather, various things (i.e., chronic or terminal illness, mental or physical disability) can similarly impact the expectations we have regarding human children, their capabilities, projected lifespans, and so on. Even when these realities pose limits on parents’

expectations for their children, it doesn't make the relationship less significant or meaningful. To the contrary, caring for a child with complex needs can strengthen caregiving bonds, as can the realization that time together might be shorter than hoped.

The view that our non-human companion animals can inhabit the same space as children would in human caregivers' lives (thereby allowing those human caregivers to *become* or *be recognized as* parents) has not been seriously considered in the literature.⁹ This is most likely because, as Jean Harvey (2017) critically notes, prominent views across the history of philosophy have assumed that non-human animals are not, and cannot be, moral subjects. Such views treat non-human animals as merely instrumentally valuable for human ends (not valuable for their own sake), and consequently, non-human animals are only objects of moral concern insofar as they are related to humans who *are themselves* moral subjects, with certain rights and who make moral claims on other moral agents.¹⁰ Such indirect views of the moral wrong of harming animals were largely popularized in the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant and by those who have followed in his philosophical wake (see Nussbaum 2006, Potter 2005, Wilson 2018 for analyses of Kant's views on the indirect moral wrong of harming animals). For Kant, any duties toward non-human animals (i.e., not to harm them) are only indirect duties that piggyback on duties owed to other human beings. For Kant, only finite rational beings have the status of moral subject, and the only such beings are human beings. The trajectory of excluding non-human animals from the moral sphere (or, of expressing only indirect moral concern for them) has largely continued in the history of Western philosophy. Insofar as non-human animals are understood to lack rationality, and insofar as rationality has been viewed as a necessary condition for moral status, non-human animals have largely failed to be treated as full and proper subjects of moral concern.

⁹ There is hope that this will change, especially as interest in the uses of neuroscience (and particularly fMRI technologies) will increase the study of the role non-human animals play in humans' lives (and vice versa). One interesting example is a 2014 study by Stoeckel et. al that uses fMRI technology to show that patterns of brain activity are similar for mothers when they view images of their human child as when they view their dog (as compared to viewing human children or dogs that are not their own). Studies like this can help lend empirical support for the idea that there are similar emotional experiences and patterns of brain activation for mothers' bonds with their human and non-human children.

¹⁰ A stark example is that on this view, there is nothing inherently wrong with harming an animal, but that act is only secondarily wrong insofar as it ultimately harms a human in some way. For example, if you kick my dog, this view would have it that you have not wronged my dog. Rather, you have wronged me, insofar as you have harmed something that stands in relation to me (or indeed, belongs to me, on some views that treat non-human companions as property).

Nevertheless, significant work (see for example Pluhar 1995) has been done in attempt to break down the rigid moral distinction typically made between human animals and non-human animals in our moral theorizing. Some philosophers (and animal ethicists in particular) have developed arguments in favor of seeing non-human animals as equally morally significant to human animals, and to ground that moral significance in something other than perceived rationality. One valuable contribution to this literature comes in the work of Anca Gheaus, whose 2012 paper titled “The Role of Love in Animal Ethics” makes the case for grounding our moral concern for non-human animals in our shared neediness, namely, our shared need for affection and companionship. On her view, rationality is not the salient feature that grounds moral status. Instead, what matters in determining moral status is the special importance of having needs, and needing others to meet those needs. Shifting the focus to meaningful relations (and especially those of giving and receiving love, affection, and/or care) offers a different starting point for theorizing about human relationships with non-human animals, and helps to justify the moral value of understanding and improving our ethical engagement with non-human animals.

Some philosophers who accept that animals do have an important moral status have largely focused their attention on the possibility and value of genuine friendship with animals. In other words, these moral philosophers who want to demonstrate the moral significance of human/non-human animal relations most often resort to doing so by arguing that humans and non-human animals can be genuine *friends* on various philosophical accounts of friendship (see for example Townley 2017). While this is surely the case (I have befriended many animals in my day!), these theorists never take the leap to attempt to show how we humans can also become *family* with non-human animals, on the basis of our current (and currently shifting) frameworks of the family.

There is, of course, an important moral distinction to be made between claiming that humans and non-human animals can be *friends*, as compared to claiming that they can attain the status of *family*. Just as human beings can enter into very different types of relationships with other humans (friendship, romantic, sexual, professional, etc.), we must also acknowledge that not all interactions and relationships with non-human animals are the same, or reducible to a single relationship form. The way I interact with a dog that I might care about but am not ultimately responsible for (i.e., a friend’s dog that I visit on weekends and occasionally take to the park for a fun day out) is significantly different from the way I interact with the dog that lives in my home

and with whom I share my intimate space on a daily basis. The difference might parallel, for example, the very different relationships that I have with my friends' children, my niece, and my partner's children. These are all children that I love and care for, though my respective relations to them differ on the basis of the varying degrees of responsibility I have for their care, as well as the disproportionate amount of time, energy, and resources I devote to supporting their health and wellbeing. The types of relationships I have in each case (and the labels that subsequently attach to me: "friend," "aunt," and "step-parent" respectively) carry with them differing levels of responsibility, social status, and moral weight. Importantly, responsibility, as well as social and moral status, tend to track the distinction between friend and family, and the proximity to the child within the category of family (i.e., the status of one's relation to their own children is likely given more social and moral weight than their relation to, say, their cousin's children, in most cases). That said, the socially recognized boundaries of "family" carry with them profound social and moral weight.

Queer-theoretic thinking about the family has helped push these boundaries of what it means to love (and what can be an appropriate object of love) and what sorts of loving relations and family structures are available and accepted. Amy Rudy (2011) suggests that queer-theory frameworks can be useful in making sense of those who prefer to be in loving relation with non-human animal companions, and to live and share life with them. "Those of us who have primary partnerships and intense bonds with nonhumans," Rudy remarks, "know about queerness...." (Rudy 2011, 40). Rudy is pushing us to consider the ways in which this relationship form has been socially devalued, vis-à-vis dominant, nuclear familial forms. When interspecies relationships are chosen at the expense of (or are at least preferred over) other human-centered relationships, the people who choose them are viewed as "sad" or otherwise strange -- loners and "cat ladies" to name a few common stereotypes. Rudy suggests that thinking queerly can help us to highlight the moral value in these traditionally undervalued relations, ultimately undermining the stereotypical assumptions and negative value judgments associated with them. "Queer theory," she writes, "teaches us to recognize various forms of intimacy that are often invisible or erased in our culture" (Rudy 2011, 42). Building family with non-human animals, especially when these bonds are the primary or central bonds in one's life, tends to be looked down upon socially. Thinking queerly about what family structures are socially acceptable and worthy of respect can help us to highlight the moral and social importance of our interspecies familial bonds.

So why are these interspecies parental bonds so important—personally and morally speaking—and why ought we to consider them as on a moral par with human/human parental bonds? I argue that the morally salient features are the same, and are often observed to the same degree in interspecies parenting relationships as they are in parenting human children. Harvey (2017) points to several benefits that stem from a loving relationship with a non-human companion animal, which mirror those of parental bonds with human children: promoting calmness or relaxation through the sense of connection, cultivating a sense of pride or giving one’s life meaning, offering an important source of social interaction, providing an outlet for care-giving behaviors, enabling the development of caregiving skills and other moral sensibilities such as empathy, etc. Through various gestures of attachment, affiliation, and dependence, relations with non-human companions (like those with human children) offer the caregiver a sense of being valued and needed (5).¹¹

Maurice Hamington has provided a convincing account of the ways in which cultivating deep bonds of care with our non-human companion animals can “foment the development of care ethics, and, moreover, provide the habit and skill needed for moral progress” (Hamington 2017, 1). Not only is the practice of giving care important for our development as moral agents, but caring for non-human animals is a particularly beneficial means of doing this: the lack of narrative communication in these relationships demands a heightened level of non-linguistic responsiveness as well as an increased effort at empathetic imagination. The inability to communicate through a shared narrative language makes the role of *embodied* and *performative* caregiving even more crucial (Hamington 2017, 2). Elisa Aatola (2012) develops this point with a specific focus on animal suffering. Since suffering is a subjective phenomenon, and non-human animals cannot communicate their suffering to humans via a shared spoken language, human caregivers have to learn to recognize and understand their non-human animal companions suffering, and consequently their specific needs, in other ways (Aatola 2012, 165).¹² Again, learning to

¹¹ While I am focusing here on the benefits to humans that are gleaned from parenting non-human companion animals, it is also important to note that there is some empirical research that points to the benefit of these particular care relations for the non-human companion animals as well. For instance, a study by Horn et. al (2013) tested dogs’ ability to complete problem-solving tasks in three test conditions, where their humans had various levels of engagement, presence and behavior (“absent owner,” “silent owner,” and “encouraging owner”). In a second experimental condition, the owner was replaced by an unfamiliar human. The researchers found that the dogs’ duration of manipulating the apparatus and attempting to problem-solve as longer when the owner was present than absent, and also longer than when the unfamiliar human was present. Their findings lend support for the idea of an owner-specific secure base effect in dogs that is similar to that of human children.

¹² Of course, the inability to communicate one’s needs via a shared spoken language is not unique to non-human animals—infants up to a certain point (and surely others who are otherwise unable to share in a narrative

understand and respond appropriately engages human caregivers' empathetic imagination, making them better caregivers more generally.

The cultivation of empathy, then, is essential to providing care well, especially to non-human animals. "Empathy," Antonio Calcagno argues, "allows us to personalize and feel into the life of our companion animals rather than just permitting us to give objective descriptions of them" (Calcagno 2017, 9). Empathizing with non-human animals helps us to recognize *their* subjectivity, and that we are just as much a part of their lives and wellbeing as they are ours. The cultivation of empathy "allows us to recognize that we share a world in common with our companion animals, and that this world is valuable and meaningful" for both parties (Calcagno 2017, 10). When we cultivate deep bonds with our non-human animal companions, we participate in the "co-construction of a shared life" (Townley 2017, 8). Our non-human companions are not to be treated as objects that we own and that we ultimately control. They are companions, in loving relation to us, and we share in the collective project of building a meaningful life together *as a family*.

Entering into caring relations with non-human animals allows human parents to develop as moral agents through sharpening their skills of performative and embodied care and empathetic imagination. "Interspecies parenting," then, not only brings a variety of the same joys and difficulties as parenting human children, as well as importantly different ones, but it also is a significant aspect of our moral lives.

IV. Why Does It Matter? Implications for Policy and Common Morality

I have argued that parenting non-humans can be just as morally significant of an experience, and the relationships just as morally valuable, as those between human parents and human children. In this section, I explore some implications of my argument for both common morality and public policy.

First, we might consider the impact that acceptance of my view could have on common thinking about the notions of parenting and family. It would require an expanded understanding of "family" to include non-human animals as members of the family in a non-superficial way (that

communicative language) also require that caregivers cultivate the ability to recognize and understand their needs without being able to communicate them via language.

is, as more than just nominally family members, but as family members on equal footing with other members). For instance, our decisions about how to act ought to equally consider our non-human animal companions' interests (i.e., would my cat enjoy being left alone all weekend while I go to the beach?) Recognizing our non-human animal companions as full members of our families also helps us to recognize and appreciate the significance of these relations for other people. Doing so might help us to better appreciate the significant grief some people feel when their non-human animal companions fall ill or pass away, but also the genuine desire folks' have to spend time with their non-human animal companions and to treat them with high levels of care and concern. Shifting our understandings of "parenting" and "family" to incorporate non-human companions is also helpful at the broader social level. It can help people who do not themselves have this particular sort of caring relationship to recognize its importance for others, in the same way in which, for example, an unmarried person might recognize the importance the marital relationship has in the lives of married folks.

In the domain of moral theorizing, expanded notions of "parenting" and "family" can help provide nuance and further development to the field of family ethics. In a recent paper, James Yeates and Julian Savulescu (2017) have argued that while there is a need for increased moral attention to our relationships with non-human companion animals, none of our currently existing moral frameworks (health care ethics, animal ethics, family ethics) provide the adequate tools to do so fully. They ultimately call for the development of a new sub-field of ethics, which they tentatively call "petethics," which would blend together features of these three already existing frameworks (Yeates and Savulescu 2017, 355). While I recognize their contribution as a step in the right direction, their conclusions do not go far enough, and introducing a new category of moral analysis, namely, "petethics," is undesirable on the grounds of parsimony. We do not need a new sub-field of ethics to analyze our moral relationships with our non-human companions if we are able to understand them as members of our families. Rather, we need to more fully develop the already existing sub-field of family ethics to account for this particular familial relationship, with its various moral dimensions of unequal power, vulnerability, and the need for giving and receiving care.¹³

¹³ Throughout the paper, Yeates and Savulescu (2017) refer to non-human companions as having "quasi-family membership." Given my arguments thus far, to refer to it as "quasi" seems to miscategorize the relationship and its significance, and anyway, Yeates and Savulescu give no real argument as for why they think this represents only

Finally, a shift in the common morality with regards to how we view non-human animal companions (as full members of our familial lives) might have the effect of establishing secondary moral obligations on others in the community to support these family structures. Drawing on Eva Feder Kittay’s work on “dependency relations,” Kathryn Norlock (2017) argues that adoptable animal companions make moral demands on all of us—even those who refuse to take on [direct] caregiving roles for themselves. Those who choose to remain “petless” do not avoid these demands, but rather have *different* [secondary] obligations to support those who take on these caregiving burdens in their place (Norlock 2017, 3). “Petless” folks who are able, Norlock argues, are under an obligation to contribute to the creation and maintenance of supportive social and political conditions for care. This can include: fostering cats or dogs, centering local shelters’ concerns in community affairs, donating money, prioritizing shelter funding, in political and non-profit gatherings, volunteering our time, donating wish-list items to shelters, and speaking or writing to encourage human companions to spay/neuter their cats and dogs (Norlock 2017, 12). The idea here is that we enter into “secondary dependence” relations with adoptable companion animals, in parallel ways that we enter into them with other humans who we are not directly responsible to care for. When we see the importance and value of caregiving for non-human companions, we then recognize the responsibility we all have to cultivate supportive networks and circumstances for care.

In addition to querying our moral understandings about non-human animal companions, we can also consider what policy conclusions can be logically drawn from the view I have put forward and the shifts in moral thinking it requires. If we come to see these relations as instances of parenting in the moral sphere, then it follows that we ought to treat them as such in the sociopolitical sphere.

So, what sorts of practical changes would my view require? For starters, some amount of fairly simple accommodations, which are already afforded to parents of human children, would be in order. Some examples that come to mind include the opportunity for priority boarding on airplanes or other forms of transit, or priority parking in shopping malls or grocery stores, when one is traveling or shopping with their non-human companion. These privileges are put in place

“quasi-family membership.” If they were willing to drop the talk of “quasi” membership, and just see non-humans as family members, there would be no need to suggest an entirely new sub-field of ethics to make sense of these moral relationships—they would simply be explored under the category of family ethics.

for parents to make things easier, or at least more convenient, as they navigate the world while also caring for a dependent child. Those parents who are shopping or traveling with non-human companions could benefit from the opportunity to utilize some or all of these conveniences which are already in place, to make their engagement in these tasks a little easier.

The more potentially challenging cases are ones that directly invoke the law, viz., where a change in the existing law would be necessary to accommodate parents of non-human companion animals in order to obtain full recognition as parents. One example regards housing regulations in the United States. At present, in most states, it is at the discretion of landlords whether or not they will accept “pets,” and they are able to make this individual judgment call precisely because the law views non-human animal companions as “pets.” I say this because when the animal in question is seen as more than a “mere pet,” (i.e., when it is a licensed therapy or emotional support animal), it is no longer at the discretion of the landlord to allow them or not—they simply have no choice but to allow the non-human animal companion and their human the ability to rent the facility in question (Brewer 2005). This example makes it clear that how we view animals and the roles they are playing in our lives has implications for how they are treated in our codes, polices, and laws. Importantly, if our non-human companion animals were legally recognized as family, they would receive more legal protection from things like housing and other discrimination(s).

Two further examples where the law would need updating to reflect the shift in how we view non-human animal companions are (1) extending parental benefits, such as paid family leave after the adoption of a new non-human animal companion for bonding, or to care for ill companions; and (2) grievance leave from school/work upon the illness or death of a non-human companion animal. Both of these changes would require a change in the law as it stands, as well as implementation in schools and workplaces to accommodate the legal recognition of our non-human companions as full members of our families. However, if my arguments for viewing non-human animal companions in this way are correct, doing so appears to be a matter of justice.

V. Considering Possible Objections

To some, what I am proposing is going to seem radical, and too far removed from how the vast majority of our society commonly understands parenting. While I agree that accepting my view

requires a radical shift in widely shared intuitions and social norms around parental love and the boundaries of family, I don't think this itself can be a reason not to accept it. Many major social changes to how we view love, relationships, and families have taken place over time, which contribute to the breaking down of narrow, exclusionary visions of family and which aim to increase visibility and respect for alternative, non-dominant family forms. Some obvious examples include the US Supreme Court cases of *Loving V. Virginia* (1967) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). The former amounted to the legal recognition of interracial love through the institution of marriage, the latter extended that institution even further to include same sex couples. Neither was without resistance and criticism, as both cases represented a major challenge to the social status quo. However, they ultimately represented the ability to reconceptualize how the law (and eventually common morality) thinks about these fundamental institutions of love, marriage, and family. The (incredibly) difficult task of changing the law, or changing individual hearts and minds, is not sufficient to render a project useless or not worth undertaking. Perhaps heavy resistance signals that the project is needed even more.

Another concern that some might have about my view involves questions of power, vulnerability, and control, given the inevitable hierarchies at work in these caring relationships. Some scholars have drawn out the dangerous elements of these relationships, due to the inherent power imbalance which make the “weaker” party vulnerable and prone to control and/or emotional and physical abuse (Carlisle-Frank and Flanagan 2006). The worry reflected in this line of objection is that the human party is always going to be in a position of heightened control relative to the non-human. Such power leaves the non-human more vulnerable—the human has more control over the physical environment, the relationship itself, and ultimately the physical and mental wellbeing of the non-human companion. Any such relationship that includes vast differentials of power has the potential for abuse: note the unfortunate realities of spousal abuse, child abuse, elder abuse, abuse of disabled folks, workplace harassment, and countless other pervasive examples). So, non-human animal companions are not unique in the way their lesser power positions them in a way that makes them more vulnerable—many of our most important caring relationships are like this.

While it is clearly important to be attentive to the power dynamics at play in any caring relationship, their mere presence and the risks that follow from them do not undermine the moral

value of the relationship form itself. We view many relationships that occur across relative differentials in power as rewarding and worthwhile, all the while acknowledging their many risks. Instead of pointing to the potential risks as possible reasons to reject the relationship form outright, or deem it immoral for this reason, I think it is more fruitful to instead focus on thinking about healthy and mutually enriching ways to conduct these relationships of love and care across unequal power. Doing so helps protect the vulnerable parties, and also creates more stable loving bonds for all who engage in these various caring relationships.

Furthermore, shifting how we view the relationship that humans have to non-human animals can actually help weaken the strength of this power imbalance and the vulnerabilities that arise as a result. At present, where non-human companion animals are likened more to property than to full members of our families, they have fewer legal protections and significantly less moral weight in our lives than they would if we made the moral shift to view them as proper members of our families. If we reinterpret these existing relationships – away from mere property relations and toward parental ones – we begin to make our non-human companion animals less vulnerable than they currently are.

The final objection that is likely to be raised against my view is that I am being overly sentimental, and/or that I am anthropomorphizing—animals simply cannot engage in a loving *relationship*, where the relationship requires reciprocity. I want to respond to this by challenging what we typically think it means for love and care to be meaningfully reciprocated. Amy Mullin (2006) gives an account of how very young children (i.e., before they are able to speak) can reciprocate care to their parents in a way that expresses mutual affection and concern. Human babies have non-verbal ways of responding to their parents' emotions, and even helping to communicate their needs to their parents, and this constitutes reciprocity *in that context*. I want to suggest that if we have too narrow a view of what it means for one to reciprocate care, we are going to exclude many caring relationships among humans which we might not want to exclude. These include, most obviously, relationships with small children, but also those with severely disabled individuals who might also lack the ability to reciprocate in “more obvious” ways, such as through spoken language, writing, or various other forms of intimacy which humans often use to signal or express their care or concern for others, but which might be limited to only those humans who possess a certain degree of cognitive development and function. It seems needlessly

biased and restrictive to only recognize a narrow range of methods for communicating affection, care, or concern. Sometimes the role of physical touch, facial expression, and overall demeanor can go a long way to show care when a shared language is unavailable. If we broaden our understanding of what counts as expressing care, we can see that non-human animals can reciprocate loving bonds with their caregivers, and can indeed show them immense love and affection.

VI. Concluding Remarks

This paper has advanced the view that in many cases, relationships between human caregivers and non-human companion animals constitute genuine instances of parenting, and deserve to be recognized and respected as such. Parenting non-humans shares many of the same features that make parenting human children morally valuable, and also involves many of the same rights and responsibilities. To fail to treat these relations as instances of parenting can amount to a disrespect to the parties of the relation—it undermines the value of their loving bond and caring relationship, and continues to reinforce narrow conceptions of the sort of parenting that is taken to matter, socially and morally.

The view on offer is not without moral and practical consequence. If we as a society are able to see these relationships as instances of parenting, we are more likely to ascribe to them the level of value and esteem typically reserved for intra-species parent/child relations among humans. This not only shifts our normative understandings of parenting and family, but also pushes us towards shifts in the policy arena—shifts that demand social and political recognition of this parenting form. The hope is that we, as a society, can begin to make this particular form of parenting both more visible and more accepted as a meaningful outlet for caregiving and parental love. Maybe then will those who are already caring for cats and dogs stop being asked the question, “But when are you going to become a parent?”

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