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COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

What We Owe Owls

Nonideal Relationality among Fellow Creatures in the Old Growth Forest

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ABSTRACT

Though many of us have constructed our lives (or have had them constructed for us) such that it is easy to ignore or forget, human lives are entangled with other animals in many ways. Some interspecies relations would arguably exist in some form or another even under an ideal model of animal ethics. Others have an inescapably non-ideal character – these relationships exist as they do because things have gone wrong. In such circumstances we have reparative duties to animals we have wronged because we have wronged them. Here I draw upon Christine Korsgaard's "Fellow Creatures" (2018) and other nonideal approaches to animal ethics to critically assess the United States Fish & Wildlife Service practice of killing barred owls to protect endangered spotted owls in the old growth forest of the Pacific Northwest. This is a difficult case to be sure, but one that can benefit from non-ideal moral assessment in terms of interspecies relational repair. I argue for increased spotted owl habitat preservation and forest restoration as an alternative to barred owl removal that better aligns with both nonideal relational animal ethics and stated US Fish & Wildlife Service values.

Keywords: animal ethics; Christine Korsgaard; endangered species; environmental ethics; interspecies relationality; old growth forest; owls; reparative justice; resource management; wildlife biology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1990 the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) was officially listed as a threatened species according to the United States Endangered Species Act. At that time environmental activist campaigns and court rulings led to significantly reduced logging and greater protection of

old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest that these owls call home. The barred owl (*Strix varia*) meanwhile did not figure prominently in the heated owl vs. timber disputes of the 1990s since historically few if any lived in the Pacific Northwest. For decades, however, the barred owl had been expanding its range westward, from the Atlantic coast and the Great Lakes farther and farther across the Great Plains, following human development that made these areas more hospitable to them than before (FWS 2013). By the 2000s it was clear to wildlife biologists that barred owls had arrived in British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, where they moved into the depleted, only recently protected habitats of the northern spotted owl.

The northern spotted owl and barred owl are thought to have common ancestors and, though they have been geographically separated for thousands of years, can still apparently successfully mate, producing so-called "sparred owls". But the tale of these two owls in the Pacific Northwest has not been about assimilation nor peaceful coexistence. Studies through the 2000s and into the 2010s show steady losses in spotted owl populations in those areas where barred owls have arrived. The problem has been not so much barred owls killing spotted owls but competing for territory, including nesting sites that spotted owls leave behind when barred owls move in. By 2010 it was clear that the already low northern spotted owl numbers were dropping as barred owl migrated to the Pacific Northwest. In 2013 the US Fish & Wildlife Service began the Barred Owl Removal Experiment (BORE), a multi-year pilot project targeting barred owls for the aim of protecting endangered spotted owls. While capture, sterilization, and other efforts to impede barred owl reproduction were deemed infeasible, "Lethal removal of barred owls was rapid, technically feasible, and cost effective" (Diller *et al.* 2014). Barred owls would have to be shot – not by hunting enthusiasts, but trained wildlife biologists who could tell the difference between owl friend and owl foe. Since 2013, US Fish & Wildlife sharpshooters killed over 3000 barred owls at four study sites across the Pacific Northwest, with the initial experiment concluding August 2021. This raises the question whether barred owl population control should be adopted as a standing policy on public land in the Pacific Northwest and perhaps even extended to private landowners empowered to shoot barred owls for spotted owl conservation on their own properties. On the prospect of a range-wide management plan, Lloyd Diller estimates,

> Managing barred owls over millions of acres would involve substantial cost and killing thousands of barred owls. Whether our profession or society at large can accept this cost remains to be seen, but we all need to know there are no easy choices in this conservation dilemma. (Diller 2013, 57)

The nonprofit group Friends of Animals took legal action against the Fish & Wildlife Service in 2014, arguing that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act did not license the deliberate killing of one bird species for the protection of another. The court ruled otherwise, however, and in March 2022 the appellate court affirmed the decision, which would seem to mean that at present there is no legal impediment to BORE being adopted as standing policy. How might ethical assessment help us make sense this situation? Here I consider several ethical considerations both for and against the possible extension of the Barred Owl Removal Experiment as standing management practice, with specific attention to the nonideal approach to animal ethics taken in Christine Korsgaard's *Fellow Creatures* (2018). Building upon this sort of nonideal reparative approach to interspecies relationality, I argue for increased spotted owl habitat preservation and forest restoration as an alternative to barred owl removal that better aligns with stated US Fish & Wildlife Service values.

2. Barred owl removal: initial moral considerations

2.1. *Animal rights (deontological considerations)*

For animal rights theorists like Tom Regan, both spotted owls and barred owls are "experiencing subjects of a life" (2003, 93) just like you and I. For his part Regan is quite clear that an animal's prima facie right not to be killed cannot be overridden simply for benefit to others – whether those others are human beings or an endangered species of owls (1983, xxviii). Now one might think that what is at issue here are not barred owl rights vs. spotted owl benefits, but rather animal rights on *both* sides. As Cheryl Abbate argues in "How to Help when It Hurts" (2016), Regan-style animal rights also include rights of assistance, particularly for animals like the spotted owl who have been victims of prior injustice. In that case, the crucial question is whether the spotted owls' rights of assistance outweigh – or are outweighed by – the barred owls' right not to be killed.

Regan acknowledges that there are situations in which one individual's rights conflict with another, not just that overriding rights may produce some benefit. In such situations where there is no ideal solution, no course of action that avoids violating someone's or something's rights, Regan argues that what morality requires of us is to *minimize* rights

violations. "Precisely because each is to count for one, and no one for more than one, we cannot count choosing to override the rights of B, C, and D as neither better nor worse than choosing to override A's right alone" (1983, 305; see also Aaltola 2005, 20-22). When the harms are not comparable, Regan says, the *severity* of rights violations is what matters. If the numbers of barred owls killed outweighs the number of spotted owls assisted, then BORE fails both the minimization and severity tests. Furthermore, if there are other viable ways to fulfill our duties of assistance to spotted owls without killing barred owls, this approach will unequivocally reject the latter as an unforced and indefensible rights violation.

2.2. *Animal welfare (consequentialist considerations)*

Though generally more reformist than radical, utilitarian and other consequentialist animal ethicists often agree with rights-based critiques of conventional uses and abuses of nonhuman animals, albeit on different grounds. Their welfare-based ethical opposition to animal agriculture and hunting, for example, is not so much that we view such animals as ours to eat or that we violate their rights when we do so, but rather the suffering to which we subject them (and the future positive experiences of which we deprive them) in the ways we confine, injure, and kill them (Singer 1990; Norcross 2004; McMahan 2008).

From a welfare-based perspective it is hard to escape the conclusion that BORE causes more suffering than it prevents; there is little reason to think this would be different were it adopted as a range-wide policy. With trained wildlife biologists as shooters, adult barred owls with younglings are avoided and spotted owls are not mistakenly, needlessly shot and killed (Diller *et al.* 2014, 3), yet the total number of barred owls killed far exceeds the number of spotted owls saved. As the Fish & Wildlife Service acknowledges (2020), the result of this pilot project has not been spotted owls numbers rebounding within the areas studied but at best their numbers stabilizing at already low levels.

Here one might reasonably respond that welfarist considerations are not simply a matter of numbers of owls' lives saved and lost, but also the flourishing and suffering they experience along the way. Death by starvation or natural predation may well be more painful and protracted than a sharpshooter's bullet. Even assuming that "on average the suffering of northern spotted owls as the result of this competition is much worse than the suffering of the barred owl", Odenbaugh (2022, 5-6) allows,

the aggregate effect on welfare would still seem to be negative since so many more barred owls have been killed – and further still more would be killed should BORE become a standing practice – to promote so few spotted owls.

2.3. *Mental health (virtue/character considerations)*

Some may suggest that moral ambivalence about barred owl removal is misplaced, that as a practice for the purpose of spotted owl conservation it is no more problematic than deer hunting as population control in habitat conversation or restoration projects. To be fair, animal-rights and animal-welfare advocates subject deer hunting to moral scrutiny too. There are also significant disanalogies between the Barred Owl Removal Experiment and standard deer culling practices. Venison can be used for personal consumption and social programs, for example, and at least in some cases, deer overpopulation is bad for the deer themselves (Ross 1992). Unlike with owls there are long-standing cross-cultural traditions of deer hunting, and unlike with owls we don't specifically assign the work of deer culling to those who have dedicated themselves to the study, care, and protection *of deer*. The use of wildlife biologists as BORE sharpshooters may be suitably discriminating, but it is not without some psychological toll. Lloyd Diller, one such experienced shooter, describes how deliberately killing owls was a decidedly new and somewhat disturbing experience. "Intellectually I believe that some barred owls need to be lethally removed in an experimental context", Diller writes (2013, 56), "but when faced with the reality of actually shooting one, it remains an internal struggle". He continues:

> I was amazed at my emotional reaction to the prospect of killing this bird – an act superficially no different than shooting a grouse or turkey. But I had always rationalized that game birds were okay to shoot because they would be eaten by my family and me, and because their demographics allowed for a harvestable surplus. In contrast, I saw owls and other raptors as something to be strictly protected. (Diller 2013, 54)

The BORE pilot project indicates that spotted owl numbers have at best leveled off in the areas studied, and given the larger phenomenon of barred owl westward migration, new barred owls will continue to populate these areas in coming years. If shooting barred owls is going to help spotted owls, it will seemingly need to continue indefinitely, which raises the concern that the psychological toll experienced by sharpshooters will continue as well. (The idea that wildlife biologists would become affec-

tively numb to the challenge of deliberately killing creatures they had previously seen as "something to be strictly protected" is hardly a morally reassuring alternative.)

2.4. *Non-intervention (wildness considerations)*

Even putting aside animal rights, overall suffering, and psychological considerations, one might oppose shooting barred owls to save spotted owls on the grounds that we as humans should not be actively interfering with nature. This seems to be the position taken up by Friends of Animals, the forementioned nonprofit organization that took legal action against the Fish & Wildlife Service. "While human-induced changes in animals' habitats is certainly a bad thing, once they happen, animals need to be able to sort it out themselves", argues Nicole Rivard (2019). "More human interference just makes it worse". I appreciate Rivard's acknowledgement of prior human wrongdoing – but she follows this up with only negative moral relationality, doubling down on human non-interference. In doing so, she repeats a mistake made too often in animal-rights activism and theorizing. Human-animal relations aren't limited to exploitation or harmful interference, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) remind us. As ecological beings we cannot help but live in relation to other animals, including domesticated, liminal, and wild populations. "We are entangled in complex relationships and rather than try to accomplish the impossible by pretending we can disentangle", Lori Gruen (2015, 63) advises, "we would do better to think about how to be more perceptive and more responsive to the deeply entangled relationships we are in".

2.5. *Anti-invasive rationale (nativist considerations)*

Most ethical arguments in favor of BORE focus on helping spotted owls and acknowledge the effect on barred owls as a regrettable, justifiable moral cost. But one might support BORE *because* it kills barred owls. One anti-invasive rationale is that barred owls simply *don't belong* in the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest and thus should be eliminated from them. In practice I have not found Fish & Wildlife administrators, scientists, or others citing this rationale in defense of barred owl removal. Notice that if this were one's primary rationale, extending BORE would not be an especially effective way to achieve it. Too few owls have been shot at pilot-project levels to come close to eliminating the species in the

region, not to mention the upstream issue of barred owls' continuing westward migration.

2.6. *Species preservation (intrinsic/political/systemic considerations)*

In contrast to the anti-invasive rationale, species preservation is cited frequently in defense of barred owl removal. If what matters most is that an endangered species is saved from extinction, then the US Fish & Wildlife pilot project must be recognized as at least a partial success, stabilizing if not increasing spotted owl numbers in study areas. What about spotted owl preservation valued not so much for its own sake but as politically or systemically valuable? As noted, spotted owl protection was a divisive issue in the 1990s: given the political capital that was spent, it seems especially tragic to lose them now anyway. Now as before, protecting the endangered spotted owl has been an effective way to protect old-growth forests indirectly by appeal to the Endangered Species Act. If barred owls replace spotted owls in old-growth areas, those areas might lose their protected status – which would converge with the previous US chief executive's agenda. "The Trump administration is proposing to eliminate protections for imperiled spotted owls by taking back critical habitat status from more than 200,000 acres of public forests in Oregon", Monica Samayoa (2020) reported. "The US Fish & Wildlife Service has proposed to reduce the Northern Spotted Owl's critical habitat population by 204,653 acres, or 2% of the 9.6 million acres that have been designated as protected habitat for the owl".

The political value of spotted owl species preservation at least partially overlaps with its systemic value. "When we endanger the spotted owl, we also endanger our communities", argues Doug Heiken, coordinator of Oregon Wild Conservation & Restoration, "because spotted owl habitat also provides us with clean water, stable water flows, carbon storage and climate stability, habitat for fish and other wildlife, community fire resilience, recreation, scenery, and quality of life" (in Samayoa 2020). Notice that some ecosystem services identified here would seem to be more about the *habitat* than the northern spotted owl itself. This reaffirms that the spotted owl's value is in part political: indirect protection of what is ecologically valuable around it. The owl itself plays a significant role in ecosystem health, to be sure, yet saving it from extinction is not necessarily enough for it to fill that role. If their populations are too low, they cannot occupy their historical niche in the ecosystemic health of old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest.

It is too soon to say whether BORE is supported or undermined (or neither) by systemic considerations, in part because it is too soon to say whether barred owls can fill spotted owls' ecosystemic niches or know what other positive and negative ecological effects barred owls might have as they migrate to new areas. Also worth noting is that the species-preservation and ecosystemic arguments here would fail or succeed regardless of human responsibility for spotted owls' endangerment. Does the fact that this is *our fault* make a moral difference? What sorts of *reparative* obligations follow from past, present, and even future human wrongdoing toward these owls and the forests in which they live?

3. Nonideal animal ethics and relational repair

"If I had been in a position to design and create a world", writes Jeff McMahan (2010), "I would have tried to arrange for all conscious individuals to be able to survive without tormenting and killing other conscious individuals. I hope that most other people would have done the same". McMahan proceeds to ask whether (and why not) we should bring an end to all predation, not just hypothetically but as active interventions in the actual world. His framing is illustrative of an ideal-theoretic ethic, seeking as it does to make sense of what our moral obligations *are* to nonhuman animals by reference to what these moral obligations *would be* if we had created them (and the rest of the world) from the ground up.

"But this is not the relation in which we stand to the other animals", Korsgaard (2018, 186) responds. "We are not their creators, and we are not creating a world from scratch. We are the inhabitants of a world we already share with other animals, and the question we are asking is what we owe to *them*". We are not creating a world from scratch, and the world we already share is one in which we have hurt, exploited, and otherwise wronged other animals – repeatedly, historically, and persisting today. To ask then what we owe them in *this* world cannot be limited to what we should do understood as what we should have done nor to what we should stop doing understood as what we should never have done in the first place, as valuable as these counterfactual questions might truly be. Given the extant reality of interspecies wrongdoing, what we *now* owe other animals should include ameliorative duties of interspecies moral repair.

Similar to Korsgaard's nonideal approach to animal ethics are recent works (Palmer 2018; Emmerman 2019; Almassi 2020) that extend notions

of moral repair (Walker 2006) and reparative justice (Walker 2010) to interspecies relationships. For her part Emmerman offers an ecofeminist account of the obligations we have to other animals in the aftermath of moral dilemmas and other conflicts. Palmer argues that we have positive duties of assistance specifically because of our prior and present wrongdoing to both domesticated and wild animals made dependent or otherwise negatively impacted by our actions. Her example is a coyote population whose habitat is lost due to human development. "If we take their interests with moral seriousness", Palmer says, "these harms should generate some backward-looking special obligations to assist" (2010, 102). We can see how this line of reasoning might be extended to northern spotted owls whose habitat has been degraded and destroyed in the Pacific Northwest.

That said, it is absolutely crucial for us to recognize that a process of interspecies relational repair, like reparative justice generally, is itself a context of ethical analysis. We must ask what sort of amends we owe spotted owls, just what they need in light of how we have wronged and continue to wrong them. Yet barred owls like other members of the affected biotic community cannot simply be disregarded in the reparative ameliorative process. Even if killing barred owls is *a* way to assist spotted owls, are there not other, better ways for us to repair this morally degraded interspecies relationship without further degrading another in the process?

These reflexive questions about nonideal interspecies relations direct us to consider alternative courses of action. Note that the US Fish & Wildlife Service itself acknowledges that barred owl competition is one of two main threats to the spotted owl's continued survival. Habitat loss is the other. Note further that the revised FWS Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan in 2011 makes three primary recommendations: (*a*) to protect remaining spotted owl habitat; (*b*) to revitalize forest ecosystems through active management; and (*c*) to reduce competition from encroaching barred owls. Given the multiple ethical issues with and modest success of (*c*), an alternate course of action with greater emphasis on (*a*) and (*b*) merits consideration. The great irony would be if we exempted even more habitat from protection while expanding barred owl killing in the name of saving endangered owls, as the Trump administration sought to position this issue.

Consider how a pilot project of greater commitment to old-growth preservation and forest restoration would fare against the various moral considerations identified in the previous sections. To be fair, this sort of alternative would probably be inadequate on the anti-invasive rationale, since it prioritizes critical habitat for spotted owls rather than removing

barred owls. Greater protection of existing old-growth forests would be compatible with the non-interventionist rationale, although folks like Eric Katz (1992; 2012) and Freya Matthews (2004) would likely resist forest restoration as further human domination of nature. But on animal rights, animal welfare, sharpshooter psychology, and ecosystemic rationales, this alternate course of action grades out better than continuing to shoot barred owls indefinitely. In terms of interspecies relational repair, our obligations are to acknowledge and apologize for historical harms visited upon spotted owls, to cease continued perpetrations which we (purportedly) genuinely acknowledge as wrong, and to make amends via actions we can perform that our nonhuman victims actually need rather than those actions that we ourselves may prefer. Shooting barred owls without protecting what little remains of old-growth habitat and restoring degraded habitats to better support spotted owls and other key members of those biotic communities fails these reparative guidelines.

4. Concluding remarks

Let us conclude by anticipating and responding to two potential skeptical responses to greater commitment to old-growth preservation and forest restoration as a better way to fulfill our nonideal obligations and repair interspecies relationality in the Pacific Northwest. The first is ecological. What if this doesn't work? What if barred owls simply expand into preserved habitats and revitalized forests and outcompete spotted owls there too? After all, Lloyd Diller warns, "the most likely outcome from setting aside more habitat will be to have even more barred owls" (2013, 55). That is indeed possible. But as an alternative answer to our main question, it may not be necessary that barred owls stay out of preserved habitats and revitalized forests. It may be enough that spotted owl populations increase or simply stabilize, even at low levels, regardless of barred owl population, for this course of action to fulfill stated US Fish & Wildlife values at least as well as adopting and expanding BORE as a standing resource-management practice.

The second skeptical response is political. Greater commitment to old-growth habitat preservation and widespread forest restoration as a solution to spotted owl conservation is nice in theory, the response allows, but not political and economically realistic. Perhaps this is true, although it is worth remembering that 1990s measures for owl conservation were often considered politically and economically unrealistic until

adopted. More to the point, if *this* is the argument against a reparative alternative and for adopting BORE as standing practice, then appeals to ecosystem health, endangered species preservation, or interspecies relational repair are exposed as little more than greenwashing. In that case, advocates for barred owl removal at least should acknowledge that their main priority is not protecting spotted owls but rather the status quo functioning of resource-management, economic, and political systems and stabilizing already low spotted owl populations to whatever extent is compatible with that.

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