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ESSAY

The virtue of compassion in compassionate conservation

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Abstract

The role of ethics is becoming an increasingly important feature of biodiversity conservation dialogue and practice. Compassionate conservationists argue for a prohibition of, or at least a strong presumption against, the adoption of conservation policies that intentionally harm animals. They assert that to be compassionate is to care about animals and that it is antithetical to caring for animals to intentionally harm them. Compassionate conservationists thus criticize many existing conservation practices and policies. Two things together challenge the philosophical foundation of compassionate conservation. First, compassionate conservationists ground their theory in virtue ethics, yet virtue ethics permits exceptions to moral rules, so there cannot be an in-principle prohibition on adopting intentional harm-inducing policies and practices. But not all compassionate conservationists advocate for a prohibition on intentionally harming animals, only a strong presumption against it. This leads to the second point: compassion can motivate a person to adopt a harm-inducing conservation policy or practice when doing so is the best available option in a situation in which animals will be harmed no matter what policy or practice is adopted. Combining these insights with the empirical observation that conservationists regularly find themselves in tragic situations, we arrive at the conclusion that conservationists may regularly advocate for harm-inducing policies and practices from a position of compassion.

KEYWORDS

biodiversity conservation, killing, lethal control, virtue ethics, wildlife management

La Virtud de la Compasión en la Conservación Compasiva

Resumen: El papel de la ética es una función cada vez más importante para el diálogo y la práctica de la conservación. Los conservacionistas compasivos alegan a favor de la prohibición, o al menos una presunción legal robusta en contra, de la adopción de políticas de conservación que dañan intencionalmente a los animales. Los conservacionistas compasivos afirman que ser compasivo es cuidar a los animales y que es contrario a esto el querer dañarlos intencionalmente. Por lo tanto, estos conservacionistas critican muchas prácticas y políticas de conservación existentes. Hay dos cosas que en conjunto cuestionan el fundamento filosófico de la conservación compasiva. La primera es que los conservacionistas compasivos basan su teoría en la ética de las virtudes, pero esta ética permite excepciones a las reglas morales, por lo que no puede haber una prohibición en principio de la adopción de políticas y prácticas que dañan intencionalmente a los animales. Pero no todos los conservacionistas compasivos abogan por la prohibición del daño intencional a los animales, sino que abogan sólo por una presunción legal robusta en su contra. Esto nos lleva al segundo punto: la compasión puede motivar a una persona a adoptar políticas o prácticas de conservación que causen daño intencional cuando esto es la mejor opción disponible en una situación en la que los animales serán dañados sin importar cuál práctica o política se adopte. Con la combinación de estas percepciones y la observación empírica de que los conservacionistas regularmente se encuentran a sí mismos en situaciones trágicas, llegamos a la conclusión de que los conservacionistas pueden abogar con frecuencia por políticas y prácticas que inducen daños desde una posición compasiva.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

conservación de la biodiversidad, control letal, ética de las virtudes, manejo de fauna, matanzas

INTRODUCTION

The role of ethics is becoming an increasingly important feature of biodiversity conservation dialogue and practice. Proponents of the new compassionate conservation movement argue that conservationists should recognize the interests of all sentient creatures in practice and that doing so prioritizes the adoption of nonlethal, nonharmful conservation practices and policies (Batavia et al., 2020; Batavia et al., 2021; Bekoff, 2020; Bekoff & Ramp, 2014; Ramp, 2013; Ramp & Bekoff, 2015; Ramp et al., 2013; Wallach et al., 2015; Wallach et al., 2018; Wallach et al., 2020; Wallach et al., 2020; [reorder oldest to newest]). Because compassion is a virtue that generally precludes intentionally harming animals, compassionate conservationists argue that many existing conservation programs are morally wrong because they inhibit the free movement of animals, kill some in the name of conservation, or otherwise promote harm or stress in animals (Ben-Ami, 2017; Wallach et al., 2018; University of Technology, Sydney 2019; Wallach et al., 2020; Batavia et al., 2020). Their idea is relatively straightforward. To be a compassionate conservationist is to “avoid deliberately harming sentient beings in conservation programs” whenever possible, which many compassionate conservationists believe is always (Wallach et al., 2020). Others believe it is possible more often than not (University of Technology Sydney, 2019).

This movement positions itself in opposition to traditional conservationists who often adopt more consequentialist decision-making processes. From this perspective, conservationists should seek to dispassionately maximize animal welfare or some other value, which may involve the adoption of lethal conservation policies and practices (Driscoll & Watson, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Oomen et al., 2019; Hampton et al., 2019). As virtue ethicists, compassionate conservationists tend to focus less on animal suffering and more on human motivations (e.g., whether humans manifest compassion toward individual nonhuman animals), whereas consequentialist conservationists tend to focus less on individual human motivations and more on weighing the outcomes for all animals affected by a policy or practice. Compassionate conservation has been criticized on multiple grounds. For example, Driscoll and Watson (2019) and Russell et al. (2016) argue that conservation is already compassionate to animals; Griffin et al. (2020), Santiago-Avila and Lynn (2020), and Callen et al. (2020) argue that human emotions are unreliable or biased; Callen et al. (2020), Hayward et al. (2019), and Johnson et al. (2019) argue that compassionate conservation will lead to a greater amount of animal harm; Oomen et al. (2019) argue that rigid adoption of its precepts will harm vulnerable human communities; and Santiago-Avila and Lynn (2020) and Hampton et al. (2019) argue that the philosophy is speciesist. Batavia et al. (2021) and Wallach et al. (2020) offer defenses of the movement, and the debate continues.

Wallach et al. (2020) argue for compassionate conservation on grounds that sentient animals are persons and so have the same or similar moral status as human beings, stating “the interests and agency of all sentient beings should be protected in conservation practice.” Others, by contrast, argue for compassionate conservation on grounds that sentient animals suffer and compassion involves “suffering with” another (Batavia et al., 2021). These compassionate conservationists conclude that when compassion is cultivated as a virtue and becomes an integral part of conservation, it leads the mind to recoil at the suggestion that it might be appropriate for conservationists “to kill or intentionally harm certain kinds of beings in certain ways to meet certain objectives” (Batavia et al., 2021). Despite their differences, proponents of compassionate conservation agree that compassion is a virtue—a morally praiseworthy, good character trait—and because it is evidently antithetical to compassion to intentionally harm another, the compassionate conservationist is always, some say, for the most part, say others, motivated to avoid adopting conservation policies and practices that intentionally harm animals.

Here, we sought to critically assess the assumption that the virtue of compassion will motivate a conservationist to regularly advocate against conservation policies and practices that involve intentional harm to animals. We argue that proponents of compassionate conservation neglect 2 points that are central to virtue ethics and the virtue of compassion. First, because virtue ethics is situational in nature and not apodictic, there cannot be an in-principle prohibition on adopting harm-inducing policies and practices. Second, even if there is only a strong presumption against intentional harm, compassion can still motivate a person to adopt a harm-inducing conservation policy or practice when doing so is the best available option in a tragic situation, understood as a situation in which animals will be harmed no matter what policy or practice is adopted (Griffin et al., 2020; Wallach et al., 2020; Batavia et al., 2020). Combining these insights with the empirical observation that conservationists regularly find themselves in tragic situations, we conclude that actions motivated by the virtue of compassion may regularly advocate for intentional harm-inducing or lethal policies and practices more often than proponents of compassionate conservation appear willing to admit.

The virtue of compassion in virtue ethics

According to virtue ethics, the locus of moral evaluation is the agent’s character, not the agent’s conformity to a moral rule, and this is because morality is too complex to be captured by moral rules (Swanton, 2003; Annas, 2007; Aristotle, 2009; Hursthouse, 2006, 1999, 2011;). For instance, adherence to rules overlooks the role of emotions, feelings, and the importance

of a person's situational relation to others, as well as reasons for human actions. The emphasis of virtue ethics is the cultivation of a good character that manifests itself in virtuous action. The virtues are morally good, praiseworthy character traits acquired through rational training. They are imbedded in the person's make up, so to speak, inclining the person to think, reason, feel, and behave in excellent and praiseworthy ways. The virtues thus encompass the whole person, from their thoughts and judgments to their emotions and behaviors. When the virtuous person performs a compassionate act, for example, they act from compassion: their cognitive appraisal correctly assesses what compassion requires in the situation, and the person feels and behaves appropriately in response. That virtues are holistic illuminates how they relate with one another. When virtuous people find themselves in situations in which compassion calls for one action and justice calls for another, their intellectual virtue of prudence discerns what the appropriate response to the situation is, and they respond accordingly. There might be conflict about what to do, but prudence—the virtue responsible for identifying the appropriate response to the situation—fosters a kind of unity in the character of virtuous people.

The focus of virtue ethics on excellent character traits can ground an account of the rightness or wrongness of actions; accordingly, virtue ethics can be action guiding in much the same way that consequentialism and deontology are. Following the work of Hursthouse (1999, 2011), an action is right if it is the action that the virtuous person would characteristically perform in that circumstance; an action is wrong if it is an action that the virtuous person would not characteristically perform in that circumstance. Where consequentialism tells one to look at the outcomes or consequences of an action and deontology tells one to look at the principle or rule, virtue ethics tells one to look at what the virtuous person would characteristically do in a given situation. That rightness and wrongness of actions are grounded in what the virtuous person would characteristically do in a particular situation given the person's unique skills, abilities, and perspective further highlights the contextual nature of moral actions.

Consider 2 soldiers on the battlefield, for example. Both ought to exhibit the virtue of courage, but what is courageous for a poorly trained soldier might be different from what is courageous for a well-trained soldier in the same situation. The courageous action for the well-trained soldier might be a rash action for the poorly trained soldier. Consider another example: that lying is wrong is a general moral rule because the virtuous person is honest, and in most ordinary circumstances, an honest person tells the truth. But this is not to say the virtuous person will never lie. For example, if a battered woman takes refuge in their house, they might lie to her abuser about her whereabouts. In this case, the virtuous person does an ordinarily wrong action, and, importantly, the virtuous person does not do anything morally wrong in this extraordinary situation. Accordingly, if the virtuous person, motivated by the virtue of compassion, adopts a conservation policy or practice that intentionally harms or kills animals, they are not performing a morally wrong action. By definition, and contrary to assertions by Batavia et al. (2021) and Wallach et al. (2020), their act of adopting this harm-

causing policy is not disrespectful, cruel, or otherwise morally wrong. The virtuous person's characteristic actions determine the morality of a particular action in a particular situation, not the action's conformity to a moral rule.

With this picture of virtue ethics before us, we turn to the virtue of compassion. The virtuous person is compassionate and compassion involves a particular affect, proper judgment, and motivation to act (Sandler & Cafaro, 2005; Sandler, 2007; Crisp, 2008; Palmer, 2010; Abbate, 2014; Gilbert, 2017; Alvaro, 2017a, 2017b; Batavia et al., 2020; Batavia et al., 2021). The virtue of compassion is grounded in one's shared relation to others and allowing oneself to be appropriately affected by the suffering of others. The compassionate person not only recognizes the suffering of another, but also feels the appropriate amount of anguish, distress, or pain for the sufferer's misfortune. Rather than ignore the suffering of others, the compassionate person is motivated to help others in the right way. Although compassion in the oldest virtue-ethics tradition has not been directed to nonhuman suffering, this is not a good reason to think that the virtuous person should not respond to nonhuman suffering with compassion (Aristotle, 2009). However, this is not a good reason to think that the virtuous person should not respond to nonhuman suffering with compassion. To be indifferent to animal suffering is callous, especially when one is in a position to prevent it or minimize it, and it would be peculiar to assert that the virtuous person has compassion for a neighbor but not for their dog. Hence, the compassionate person not only cares about how their own actions affect animals; they also care about harm they are not directly responsible for or related to (e.g., the treatment of animals in a foreign country). Applied to biodiversity conservation, while the compassionate person cares a great deal about conservation policies and practices that intend direct animal harm (e.g., killing invasive predators), they also care a great deal about conservation policies and practices that impose indirect, unintended harms (e.g., harms resulting from animal invasions on account of the conservationist doing nothing). To be indifferent to all of the harms animals experience is callous and cold and is not compassionate, especially when the conservationist is in a position to mitigate or minimize those harms.

Two additional features of compassion are also worth clarifying. First, it is widely acknowledged in both virtue ethics and environmental ethics that compassion toward animals is intuitively owed in different degrees depending on how those animals relate to us and our role in causing their suffering (Sandler, 2007; Palmer, 2010; Hursthouse, 2011). For example, Palmer (2010) argues that what compassion requires of people regarding the suffering of animals varies depending on whether the animal is a pet or wild or on whether a person causes the harm or not. More compassion is required of virtuous people for their distressed family pet than for a distressed wild animal they might encounter. Second, compassion itself may motivate a person to harm or kill an animal. Hursthouse (2011) gives the example of the virtuous person wringing the neck of a wounded bird. This is an action that the virtuous person otherwise avoids, and it certainly appears to be a cruel action. However, in a situation in which a bird is injured with no hope of recovery, this is precisely the action that a compassionate person would perform.

This is not to say virtuous people enjoy killing such a bird or that they do not feel sad about doing so; it simply means that it can be the morally right, compassionate thing to do under the circumstances. Thus, contrary to Wallach et al. (2020) and Bekoff (2017, 2020), if the virtuous person adopts a conservation policy or practice that intentionally harms or kills animals, they do so from compassion.

Against an in-principle prohibition on animal harm

All parties agree that the virtuously compassionate person cares about promoting animal flourishing and ending animal harms (Nobis, 2002; Hursthouse, 2006, 2011; Vucetich & Nelson, 2007; Bekoff & Ramp, 2014; Alvaro, 2017a, 2017b; Wallach et al., 2018; Wallach et al., 2020; Batavia et al., 2021). The difficult issue is how compassion manifests itself in conservation practice. Specifically, would the virtuously compassionate person refrain from adopting policies and practices that intentionally harm animals (e.g., targeted killing of invasive predators)? Some proponents of compassionate conservation say that compassion should lead us to adopt a “first-do-no-harm” principle (Bekoff & Ramp, 2014), an “individuals matter” point of view (Wallach et al., 2018), or a value of “peaceful co-existence” (University of Technology Sydney, 2019). Wallach et al. (2020) explain that compassion toward animals motivates one to minimize animal suffering, “but not by intentionally harming” them. Bekoff (2017) writes that “killing isn’t an option.” On this view, compassionate conservationism calls for a profound reimagining of existing conservation policies and practices.

The problem with this position is that it is not well grounded in virtue ethics. In other words, there is a conflict between virtue-ethics theory and a categorical prohibition on intentionally harming animals. As noted, virtue ethics is situational, not apodictic. There are moral rules of thumb in virtue ethics, but they are grounded in the actions and behaviors that the virtuous person characteristically does in ordinary circumstances (Hursthouse, 1999). In extraordinary circumstances, the virtuous person may characteristically perform a different action, and when they do, they are neither violating a moral rule nor acting out of character. Thus, the guiding principles of compassionate conservation (e.g., first do no harm) are violable in ways that can be consistent with compassion. The compassionate person may, therefore, intentionally harm or kill animals in some situations and be consistent with virtue ethics.

Compassion in a tragic situation

Some compassionate conservationists might respond to the above by claiming that they already allow for the adoption of conservation policies and practices that involve harming animals in some, albeit rare, situations. Rather than outright prohibition, they instead might advocate for only a strong presumption against adopting policies and practices that involve conservationists in intentional harm. They might also believe that this

presumption can be met in many or most cases (Batavia et al., 2020; Batavia et al., 2021).

Everyone might agree that one should refrain from intentionally harming animals and instead only seek viable nonlethal, nonharmful options. But it is often the case that no matter what the virtuous conservationist does, animals will die or otherwise be harmed (Hayward et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Callen et al., 2020). Here are 2 examples. Although the virtuous person may not eat animals, they live in a world in which many people do (Hampton et al., 2021). Consider a cattle station in Australia. The cattle are well fed and are free to roam around. In all probability there are carnivores, like dingoes (*Canis lupus dingo*), in the area that kill and eat the cattle. The virtuous conservationist has limited options, some of which involve intentional harm to animals and some of which involve foreseeable harm to animals (Fleming et al., 2012; Allen & Hampton, 2020): do nothing, build a fence, shoot the dingoes, use poison bait, or deploy guard animals. To do nothing benefits the dingoes and permits predation harm to the cattle; fencing restricts ecosystem functioning and other fauna and requires the removal of dingoes from within the fenced area anyway; shooting dingoes harms predators and does not effectively reduce harm to cattle across large areas; poison baiting harms dingoes and may harm some nontarget animals; guardian animals harm dingoes and may themselves be harmed (Allen et al., 2019). No option presents itself as harmless to all animals.

Alternatively, consider feral camels (*Camelus dromedarius*), an invasive species in Australia (Griffin et al., 2020). The conservationist can adopt a lethal strategy that harms camels or a nonlethal strategy ranging from doing nothing to catch, neuter, and release. Nonlethal strategies are not harmless, however (Johnson et al., 2019; Hampton et al., 2019; Callen et al., 2020), and can produce harms of greater intensity than lethal strategies (Sharp & Saunders, 2011). Doing nothing permits harm to other animals in the environment, leading many more animals—camels and others—to die by starvation. Catch, neuter, and release strategies take time to have an effect, leading to continued ecological strain, and only work if a sufficiently high proportion of animals are caught in the first place (Hone et al., 2010). There is also a great deal of harm associated with capture and castration practices, which may lead to more animal suffering in the short term (Palmer et al., 2012; Callen et al., 2020). The point of these examples is that there is often no conservation option that is harmless to all animals (Hampton et al., 2021). Other possible examples of tragic situations are easy to come by (Minteer & Collins, 2005; Conde et al., 2013; Abbate, 2014; Callen et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2020).

Tragic situations demand that the virtuously compassionate person decides which policy or practice to adopt with the full knowledge that some animals will be harmed no matter what decision they make. Under optimal circumstances, virtuous managers would refrain from adopting a policy that involves harming animals because they try “not to inflict intentional and unwarranted suffering” (Wallach et al., 2018). However, as these examples suggest, many circumstances are not optimal because decisions must be made, decisions that will affect individual animals. Virtuous people are motivated by compassion to

minimize harm in such situations because they would appear callous or cruel if they adopted a prohibition on intentional animal harm knowing or reasonably believing that doing so would create significantly more animal harm. Abbate (2014) explains: “An uncompassionate person is one who would maintain” that countless animals “should endure a painful life in the name of a negative duty to not kill or cause harm to beings with inherent worth.” Thus, when virtuous managers adopt a conservation policy or practice that intentionally harms or kills animals, they do so because they want to prevent a greater tragedy from occurring.

CONCLUSION

Most agree with Batavia et al. (2021) that “compassion should animate and inspire conservation actions, intentions, and interactions.” Most conservationists of all persuasions care about animals and are to some extent motivated by compassion, as critics of the compassionate conservation movement are apt to point out (e.g., Russell et al., 2016; Driscoll & Watson, 2019; Hayward et al., 2019). The problem, however, is that, while proponents of compassionate conservation advocate for conservation policies and practices that do not harm animals, this view is not well grounded in virtue ethics. In today’s world, it regularly happens that invasive species threaten other species and a prohibition on intentional animal harm would knowingly result in more animal suffering. Because virtue ethics is situational and the compassionate conservationist cares about all animal harm, they might well be motivated to adopt lethal or other harm-inducing policies. An important issue of continuing research is to examine whether contemporary conservation policies and practices minimize animal harm and, if not, what policies and practices would (Minteer & Collins, 2005; Reddix & Forsyth, 2007; Fraser & Macrae, 2011; Dubois et al., 2017; Rohwer & Marris, 2019; Doherty et al., 2019; Wallach et al., 2020). Because it is often the case that there is no harmless option, we suspect that compassion may motivate the adoption of traditional conservation policies and practices that permit intentional animal harm and killing more often than compassionate conservationists would like to admit. The devil is always in the details, so the challenge for the emerging compassionate conservation movement is to demonstrate how their proposed approach minimizes harm to all animals. This is a herculean task, of course, but it is foundational to supporting their proposed reinvention of traditional conservation policies and practices.

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