

## **Fit To Be Tamed\***

**By Lee Hall\*\***

With all the talk of the connection between human and nonhuman rights these days, one might wonder why so little is said about pets. In North America today, pet ownership is the most common context in which humans interact with other animals; yet the institution has largely escaped critique. Use of the word "pet" as a term of sexual objectification has rightly incurred the ire of the socially aware, but the existence of the pet animal has largely been taken as a given.

Throughout this continent's history, there has always been an Other: somebody whose freedom would be antithetical to progress; somebody fit to be conquered, tamed, controlled, and ultimately put to use, by any available means, for the benefit of commerce. The Other could be desired, mastered, possessed, and consumed. Many (if not most) people now seek to harness freedom where it remains, whether in a natural force or in an untamed animal. We ourselves still have such freedom within our psyches, shrunk by years of repression. We fear its allure. Other animals fly, see in the dark, live without judges or prisons, and die unconcerned about treacherous offspring who might contest their wills. We have tried to capture and sell the idea of their sexual prowess, as evidenced by such pathetic inventions as Alpha Male Plus, a potion advertised as containing a hormone extract from the Wapiti Elk and touted as "the only multiple orgasm supplement for men." [1]

In our cities, domesticated pets, like tigers in zoos, might fulfil a desire for a touch of wildness, a desire felt by people who have grown distant from the natural world. One writer recently mused, "Today, for many of us our last real link to the animal world, these pets still seem to me like ingratiating foreign visitors to our world...comically out of place, pretending to fit in, to be one of us, trying not to be found out and deported." [2] But what is comical about being out of place? What is comical about being forced to evade deportation? Such amusement is the prerogative of the citizen whose papers are in order.

Should we derive amusement from usurping the autonomy of fleet-footed wildcats and rendering them vulnerable to the merciless or adorable to the merciful who delight in their miniature footprints and peeping cries? Successful domestication of cats, wolves, and other free-living animals is based on neoteny -- the retention in the adult animal of the juvenile characteristics that prompt an animal to need and solicit care. [3]

### **The Geography of Caring**

The radius of our respect for those who inhabit our world depends on how broadly we define our moral community. Humans tend to define moral communities narrowly; as I write this essay, we are bombing one another. So

how competently can we look after other beings? Each year, owners abandon millions of dogs and other pets, often for trivial reasons: The puppy's holiday-gift newness has worn off; the child has grown up and moved away; the dog barks too much; an unexpected veterinary bill arrives. The dogs show up in pounds, where millions are killed, and some are seized for vivisection. A relative few are used for breeding or held in cages as blood donors for their more fortunate counterparts. Others become guard dogs, dropped off each night in oily, urban car parks surrounded by barbed wire; an evasive few are left to procreate behind bushes, under buildings, and in junkyards.

Some go to live with decent people who keep them fed and clean and treat them kindly. But even in the best situations, dogs depend on a human owner for everything in life, including when they'll be able to urinate. Decent people are owners nonetheless.

Darwin wrote: "Animals, whom we have made our slaves, we do not like to consider our equals." [4] If we have enslaved animals, the existence of a few relatively well-treated house slaves does not justify this enslavement any better than it did human enslavement. And the house slaves can exist only as long as slavery does. Not that we should decline to help and sustain animals who are already born. Some first-generation freed persons sought the protection of their former owners; but this need for protection was demeaning. Once the controlling class acknowledged that slavery was odious, a reformed or humane version of slavery wasn't a morally acceptable option. Is humane ownership of animals morally acceptable? Moral consistency puts the burden of persuasion on those who maintain the acceptability of slavery within the nonhuman context.

We pet owners often find the deaths of our animals unbearable. We use what medical techniques we can afford to prolong our animals' lives; and we do this for the same reasons for which we cling to any beloved family member. Yet, because a pet cannot tell us when it's time to let go, it's difficult to identify the moment when our efforts cease to be in the pet's interest and become transformed into desperate bids to comfort ourselves. Yet there's a bigger, often-overlooked issue here: It is to comfort the owning class that pets are born in the first place.

Fashioning toys out of other living beings -- selectively mutating powerful wolves into cuteness, separating them from their families, buying and selling them, subjecting them to praise or punishment at whim, making ourselves their masters -- speaks not to our caring for other animals. Some of us have sworn off buying animals. Some of us run sanctuaries or actively support local animal-rescue systems. But calling the adoption of an animal a "rescue" can blur the point that humans put other animals in the position of abject dependence in the first place.

### **The Edible Companion**

Although the argument that nonhumans shouldn't be owned leads to the

conclusion that deliberate domestication of animals into pets is morally objectionable, we who become aware of the ubiquitous subjugation of animals may tend to manage our distress by focusing on what activists call the "worst abuses" and saving our harshest invectives for the errors of people in faraway lands. By denouncing particularly egregious acts of cruelty, or deploring foreigners' barbaric customs, we who intend to take the humane perspective often have trouble seeing what we do at home or the benefits we derive from the pervasive commodification of other animals.

A perennial British animal-protection campaign, for example, avoids mentioning the overall situation of nonhuman animals in Britain but singles out and reprehends the slaughter methods approved for Muslims. Similarly, rather than focusing on the ethical question of commodifying sentient beings, North American activists often direct invective at the horrid conditions of Asian cat and dog flesh markets.

A vivid illustration of the latter occurred in 2002, when the BBC took notice of a seminar for Korean restaurateurs.[5] The event included a presentation by Ahn Yong-keun, a food science professor nicknamed Dr. Dog Meat, who promotes recipes for dishes using dogs. Seminar presenters planned to collect signatures backing moves by lawmakers to permit the sale of dogs for human consumption. Proponents of legalization contended that regulations would enable officials to promote the humane slaughter of dogs. Outrageous? The concept that we should slaughter them humanely is precisely the perspective most North Americans support when it comes to chickens, cows, and pigs.

Professor Frank Wu of Howard University Law School notes that "[d]og-eating is an international urban legend with some truth to the tale." [6] Professor Wu describes a 1989 Long Beach, California case in which Cambodian refugees fatally bludgeoned a puppy. A judge found that "they had not inflicted unreasonable pain on their meal." Although the refugees probably hadn't inflicted unreasonable pain by meat industry standards, animal advocates expressed outrage at the ruling. The case prompted the California legislature to enact a statute making it a misdemeanor to eat dog or cat flesh. Needless to say, no similar laws appeared on behalf of pigs, cows, or chickens. Wu argues that the improved case against eating dogs, "possibly the only case that merits notice," is the case for a vegetarian lifestyle. "The prohibition against eating dogs," writes Wu, "becomes only a particular example in that line of reasoning." Indeed, cultural peculiarities are merely details in the bigger moral picture of carnivorous conduct in general.

Any marketplace where animals are caged and sold as food products warrants criticism, yet we might broaden Professor Wu's logic. Our own institution of pet ownership -- the form of domination over cats and dogs that we accept and even regard as virtuous -- certainly connects with humanity's domination of these same animals in other ways. We can point the finger at the barbaric eating of dogs without noting that our habit of making companions out of dogs who have no say in the matter sets the stage for the killing of many

millions in shelters and laboratories each year. Is our way substantially less barbaric? The first pets, some have speculated, may have been the young of animals killed by human hunters.[7] If this is so, the invention of pet-keeping is a collateral effect of humanity's shared history of having developed a taste for flesh.

### **Romantic paternalism**

Perhaps we could gain an insight into our love of pets by considering U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brennan's observation in the 1976 case *Frontiero vs. Richardson* that our long history of patriarchal dominion "was rationalized by an attitude of 'romantic paternalism' which, in practical effect, put women, not on a pedestal, but in a cage." For centuries, well-meaning and otherwise-intelligent men had this attitude. They may have thought, "I'm not part of an oppressive paradigm; I love women, and I love my wife." Personal affection for individual women doesn't disprove the existence of institutionalized oppression. Such affection shows that reasonable, ethically minded people can have substantial blind spots. And if this is so, couldn't it also be the case that well-meaning people have, also for centuries, had a similar blind spot with regard to other animals?

Consider the rationale presented by Matthew Scully, a speechwriter for George W. Bush. In *Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, Scully insists on the correctness of our authority over other animals: "It is our fellow creatures' lot in the universe, the place assigned to them in creation, to be completely at our mercy, the fiercest wolf or tiger defenseless against the most cowardly man." Having summarily demoted the once-proud cat and wolf, Scully proceeds to consider the term *pet* "exactly right in capturing the creatures' utter reliance on our good will, and indeed their sheer, delightful uselessness apart from mutual affection." Scully continues, "That dependence and the trust it instills are the whole point, the fun of it." [8] According to Scully the tame animal is "the most natural of all, displaying qualities hidden within its own nature that only human kindness can elicit." [9]

Evidently, those hidden qualities include the diseases and deformities that have been inbred into many pets. A small dog's body surface area may exceed body mass, frustrating the natural ability to maintain body heat. All of nature's risks and perils notwithstanding, would some ancestral wolf ever have opted to spawn such progeny as modern bulldogs, who can't give birth without surgery? Would some ancestral cat ever have traded freedom for the chance to become a Manx, susceptible to bearing kittens with spina bifida, or a Peke-faced Persian, whose eyes and sinuses may be so deformed that they require antibiotics for life? Why do we feel comfortable making such choices? These breeds are but examples of what is permitted to us once we accept domestication.

Pet ownership is justified on the grounds that the pets benefit from a symbiosis with humanity that developed naturally over millennia. Notably, the various modern breeds of cat have been produced within the last two

centuries. Today's breeders thrive on trends, so new breeds appear regularly. An essay displayed on a popular pet-food industry website states that pet ownership was uncommon in Europe until the end of the 17th century, and rarely seen outside of aristocratic households until the late 18th century. The essay explains, "Pet keeping in its present form is probably a 19th century Victorian invention. At this time, it was perceived as a link with the natural world, which itself was no longer seen as threatening. It also allowed a visible demonstration of man's domination over nature." [10]

North Americans spend more than \$15 billion annually on pets. They spend it at the malls that have replaced land that once belonged to free wolves and wildcats. A perverse sort of logic would call this natural. But a perennial habit of human chauvinism -- indeed, of any type of chauvinism -- is its pledge to speak on behalf of nature. Transcending our culture's dominator mentality will entail taking a fresh look at our everyday and apparently benign forms of domination. Asking whether the institution of pet ownership is really so benign after all would not negate our deep caring for the individual animals in our homes. To the contrary, it would mean the beginning of respect for other animals. We would consider their true natures rather than accept the natures that we, the class who may buy and sell animals at whim, have imposed on them.

It's time to go to the heart of Justice Brennan's metaphor. We rationalize our dominion over other animals in part by making ourselves their benefactors. In practical effect, this doesn't put them in a loftier place; it keeps them forever in cages.

[1] See <http://www.dietbreakthru.com/alphamaleplus.htm> or [http://alphamale.magnarx.com/\\_B64S\\_YWxwaGFtYWxlLzgwMDIvbHdydWxlcy9BQUEvLy8=\\_E/order.html](http://alphamale.magnarx.com/_B64S_YWxwaGFtYWxlLzgwMDIvbHdydWxlcy9BQUEvLy8=_E/order.html)

(the latter featuring a photo of an elk with the caption "Alpha Male Plus will make you a worthy rival to this stud!")

[2] Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, St. Martin's Press (2002), p. 5. See "An Iconoclast's Guide to Dominion" (this author's review of the book) at <http://www.friendsofanimals.org/scully.htm>.

[3] For references addressing domestication, see Danielle LaBruna, "Columbia University Introduced Species Summary Project: Domestic Cat (*Felis catus*)" (2001) (explaining that the cat was likely domesticated in Egypt from local populations of its free ancestor, *F.lybica*, in a domestication process that began around 6,000 BC), published at [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/cerc/danoff-burg/invasion\\_bio/inv\\_spp\\_summ/Felis\\_catus.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/cerc/danoff-burg/invasion_bio/inv_spp_summ/Felis_catus.html); *Pedigree.com*, "The domestication of dogs and cats" (2003), published at <http://www.pedigree.com/NR/exeres/51BCC2AC-992C-4D91-B015-008A44CDAF6F%2C813F0A28-0246-4740-881A->

[A67DCAA8206C%2Cframeless.htm?Section=Behavior](#).

[4] Charles Darwin, *Metaphysics, Materialism, and the Evolution of Mind: Early Writings of Charles Darwin*, transcribed and annotated by Paul H. Barrett; with a commentary by Howard E. Gruber (1974), p. 187.

[5] Caroline Gluck, "South Korea promotes dog meat" - *BBC* (13 Jan. 2002) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1758765.stm>.

[6] Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in American Beyond Black and White* (in Chapter 6, "The Best 'Chink' Food: Dog-Eating and the Dilemma of Diversity") (2002), pp. 218-226.

[7] Matthew Scully, *Dominion*, p. 5.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

[10] *Pedigree.com*, "The evolution of pet ownership" at <http://new.mypetstop.com/NR/exeres/4BF6EE95-C673-46A6-AFD9-8649E55678A7%2C813F0A28-0246-4740-881A-A67DCAA8206C%2Cframeless.htm?Section=Behavior>

(explaining that prior to that time, pet ownership was peculiar to royalty and the most wealthy).

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