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Keep Your Cats Indoors: a Reply to Abbate

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Abstract

Abbate (2019) argues that, under certain conditions, cat guardians have a moral duty to allow their feline companions to roam freely outdoors. She contends that outdoor access is crucial to feline flourishing, which means that, in general, to keep cats indoors permanently is to harm them. She grants that, in principle, we could justify preventing cats from roaming based on the fact that some cats kill wildlife. However, she points out that not all cats are guilty of this charge, and she argues that, in any case, cats do not cause more harm to wildlife—and may actually cause less—than those animals would suffer anyway. I criticize both of these replies, arguing that cat guardians have a responsibility not to let their cats harm wildlife; that cat guardians usually do not know whether their cats kill wildlife; and that, on balance, cat caused harms to wildlife may well outweigh the harms that cats suffer when confined.

Imagine that you have a teenager with a significant cognitive disability. His disability is such that he doesn't grasp the significance of hazards; moreover, he doesn't appreciate his own strength. This is challenging enough at home, where you have carefully adapted the environment to his needs. When he heads outside, it's far more complicated.

Unfortunately, your son *adores* being outside. He simply relishes it. And he is not content to explore only when you're able to accompany him. If you accidentally leave the front door unlocked, he'll slip out and wander the neighborhood. As a result, there have been some close calls. He walks into the street without regard for passing cars, so drivers have had to screech to a halt to avoid him. There have also been some "incidents." You wince, for instance, when you recall the time he hit your elderly neighbor—not because he was angry, but because he thought they were playing a game. Your son left him with a black eye.

It's obvious that an important dimension of your son's wellbeing depends on being able to explore the outdoors. It brings him enormous pleasure. It's also obvious—at

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least to me—that you should not let him leave the house unsupervised. If he were my son, I'd think I ought to minimize the risks he poses to himself and others.

However, I suspect that C. E. Abbate cannot agree, at least if her (2019) is any guide. In that rich and fascinating essay, she argues that, under certain conditions, people with cats have a moral duty to allow their feline companions to roam freely outdoors. The argument is powerful. Abbate argues that some *ethological* behaviors are especially important for wellbeing. These are adaptive behaviors that "involve active engagement, cognitive challenge, and control" (2019, 12). Unlike feeding or having sex, which are bodily pleasures, ethological behaviors produce flow pleasures, which are particularly rich and satisfying experiences that come from being absorbed in challenging activities that require a corresponding level of skill. Abbate contends that hunting and patrolling are ethological behaviors for cats—behaviors for which there are no indoor substitutes. So, to deny cats the freedom to roam outdoors is to harm them by denying them especially pleasurable pleasures. This creates a prima facie duty to allow cats to roam. She grants that this duty would be overridden if cats make wildlife worse off than they'd otherwise be. But first, she argues that this justification only works for cats who hunt, and not all do. Second, she contends that cats don't cause more harm to wildlife, and may actually cause less, than those animals would suffer anyway.[1]

I'm inclined to agree with Abbate's detailed arguments for the importance of roaming to feline wellbeing. Flow pleasures do seem especially important for flourishing, and it's plausible that cats experience such rich experiences when patrolling their territory and hunting. Additionally, I grant that those who care for cats can't fully replace those flow pleasures by enriching indoor environments, so some cats are harmed by being kept indoors.[2] However, I'm not convinced by her replies to worries about feline impacts on wildlife.

The problem with her second reply—about cats not causing more harm to wildlife than they'd suffer anyway—depends on the moral framework we invoke. As the teenage son case reveals, however, we have strong intuitions in analogous situations (assuming, as Abbate does, that there are deontological constraints on how we relate to animals).[3] Despite the importance of roaming outdoors to your son's wellbeing, it seems wrong to expose your neighbors to the risk that he poses. It doesn't matter if there are other threats to your neighbors, i.e., other ways in which they might be harmed. It doesn't matter if, in fact, your neighbors' lives are far less good than they should be; it doesn't matter if their lives involve significant suffering (as is plausibly the case for the many wild animals, just as Abbate argues). Still, you ought to minimize the risks that your son poses to others: their wellbeing isn't his to jeopardize, even if their respective base rates of wellbeing are low. And since you are partially responsible for what he does, we should note that their wellbeing isn't *yours* to jeopardize either. What's more, it seems irresponsible to expose *your son* to the risk of serious injury or death, even at the cost of an important contributor to his wellbeing. Moral caution isn't solely for the sake of your neighbors, but for your son himself.[4]

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[1] Despite the obvious practical significance of this issue for many ordinary people, and the remarkable amount of attention that it received in the popular media, the philosophical literature on the topic is very small—essentially, just DeGrazia (2011), Palmer and Sandøe (2014), and now Abbate (forthcoming a), with the discussion in DeGrazia (2011) being extremely brief.

[2] It's much less clear how we should assess the net effect of being kept indoors on wellbeing, given that indoor environments protect cats from various threats.

[3] See, e.g., Abbate (2018), forthcoming b).

This point is also relevant to Abbate's first reply to concerns about feline impacts on wildlife—namely, that not all cats hunt. This move is not sufficiently sensitive to concerns about moral risk. To be prevented from flourishing is to suffer a significant harm. But to lose your life is to suffer an even greater harm.[5] So, even a small risk of a wild animal's death is a reason to limit a cat's access to the outdoors. Obviously, free-roaming cats are unsupervised, and, as a result, it's hard to know whether your particular cat kills wild animals. There are, as Abbate notes, "kitty cams" that can be used to get some evidence here. Surely, though, most people with cats make no such efforts and so aren't in a position to tell what their cats do when unsupervised. What's more, the easy-to-acquire evidence is misleading. Many people probably people judge whether their cats are hunters based on whether they bring bodies home. But Loyd et al. (2013a) found that cats left 49% of their prey where they caught them, ate 28% at the kill site, and only brought 23% back to their residences. So, what people see is only a quarter of the total. Hence, the precautionary approach seems like the right one.

In any case, let's return to Abbate's second reply to concerns about the harms that cats cause to wildlife. She claims that cats don't cause more harm, and may cause less, than those animals would suffer anyway. For this to claim to do the relevant work in her argument, she needs the evidence to support the view that, in general, the amount of wellbeing lost by an individual cat who's kept indoors is greater than the aggregate wellbeing that's lost by the wild animals whose lives are shortened by that cat. If the evidence did not support that claim, then we wouldn't be entitled to believe that it's permissible to allow our cats to roam (assuming we don't have good evidence that our cats aren't hunters). It seems to me, though, that we don't have good reason to endorse this hypothesis—and we have some reason to doubt it.

Let's make up some numbers. Suppose that not being allowed to free-roam reduces a cat's wellbeing significantly: say, by 20 units on a 100-unit scale of daily wellbeing.[6] By contrast, being killed robs an animal of all its wellbeing. We might stipulate that, on average, the animals that cats kill would have lived a week longer had free-roaming cats not found them. Even if, as Abbate argues, their base level of wellbeing is relatively low—say, 50/100, due to the burdens of disease, injury, and other stressors—that means a loss of 350 units of wellbeing per animal. So, one kill is equivalent to 17.5 days of lowered feline wellbeing. If, on average, free-roaming cats kill one wild animal every 2 weeks, then cats ought to be kept indoors.

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[4] Obviously, there's an evolutionary sense in which patrolling territory and hunting are "natural" for cats. And in that sense, the teenage son's actions aren't natural. But it's hard to see how naturalness is relevant here. Suppose that patrolling territory and hunting *had not* been selected for, that it was an evolutionary accident that these behaviors contribute significantly to feline well-being. Or suppose, more radically, that an evil scientist found some way to reprogram cats who had not wanted to patrol or hunt such that they now *do* want to do these things. Either way, it would still matter that these behaviors are now, in fact, important for well-being, and their unnaturalness would be irrelevant. These cases show that the origin only matters for epistemic reasons: The evolutionary story increases our confidence that these behaviors are important for felines. The origin story does not matter for moral reasons.

[5] Granted, Abbate could deny this. Sometimes, I'm inclined to deny it too. But there are costs to rejecting it. For instance, if we deny that death is a greater harm than being prevented from flourishing, then we may be committed to saying that it would be better for most wild animals to die, given the extensive suffering in nature that prevents them from achieving high levels of wellbeing.

[6] To be clear, the claim here is *not* that cats confined indoors have 80/100 possible units of wellbeing. Rather, it's that *relative to their base rates of wellbeing*, which are determined by a range of environmental and individual factors, confinement reduces feline wellbeing by another 20 units.

On average, how many wild animals *do* free-roaming cats kill? Let's use the number in Loss et al. (2013) and be careful to limit our attention to "owned" cats (vs. "un-owned" cats, which they define "to include farm/barn cats, strays that are fed by humans but not granted access to habitations, cats in subsidized colonies and cats that are completely feral" (2013a, 2)).[7] Their median estimates by species are as follows:

Birds: 744 million
Mammals: 1.353 billion
Reptiles: 52.58 million
Amphibians: 19.03 million[8]
Total: 2.168 billion

If they're correct that there are roughly 84 million owned cats in the contiguous USA, then we get an estimate of 25.8 animals killed by free-roaming cats per year—or roughly one animal every 2 weeks. And again, this is relevant to Abbate's first reply. If we don't have good evidence that our cats aren't killers, we should assess the risks they pose to wildlife based on the average effect that owned cats have. And the average is high enough to outweigh the lost feline wellbeing.

Plainly, Abbate could contest the numbers I used for illustrative purposes. Perhaps she'd argue that being kept inside reduces a cat's wellbeing more than 20 units, that the animals cats kill wouldn't live a full week without feline predation, or that the baseline levels of wellbeing for these wild animals are even lower than I've assumed. Fair challenges. The point, however, is not that these numbers are unassailable. Instead, the point is that Abbate hasn't met her burden. We don't know what the right numbers are, but there's no particular reason to think they'll break her way, not least because I've made some charitable assumptions. For instance, I've assumed that the median kill estimates are correct, though higher ones may well be accurate. Moreover, I've assumed something we know to be false: namely, that *all* owned cats are part of the problem. Plainly, many people keep their cats indoors all the time, so the number of deaths we attribute to each owned cat *who's allowed to free-roam* should really be higher. Loyd et al. (2013b) found that roughly half the people in their study kept their cats indoors, and if that's true generally (at least in the USA), then we should double our kill estimate to one animal per week. (Or consider Kays et al.'s (2020) finding that cat guardians reported, on average, 3.5 kills per month, recalling the evidence mentioned earlier that guardians only know about a quarter of the kills.) Given the once per week rate, we could double our estimate of confinement's negative impact on feline wellbeing (where confinement reduces daily wellbeing by 40 rather than 20 units on a 100-unit scale) without changing the outcome. So, the evidence does not seem to support the view that, on average, keeping cats indoors results in a greater loss of wellbeing than what's lost by the wild animals whose lives are shortened by cats.

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[7] The "owned" vs. "un-owned" language is from Loyd et al. (2013a). Some might object to this language on the grounds that rights-bearers cannot be owned, even if they can be kept captive. In my view, however, there's room for reasonable disagreement here even among proponents of the rights view. We might think that it's valuable to *highlight* that these cats are owned, thereby drawing attention to a system within which they are reasonably—albeit wrongly—viewed as property.

[8] I generated the numbers for reptiles and amphibians by assuming that we can attribute 89% of the total estimate to un-owned cats, which is the percentage of mammalian deaths that they attribute to un-owned cats (vs. the 69% of avian deaths that they attribute to un-owned cats). This only helps Abbate, but it does not make much difference, as those numbers are relatively small to start.

To be clear, I agree with Abbate that owned cats are unfairly demonized. Human beings are responsible for far more death and destruction than felines, and so we, rather than they, deserve the closest moral scrutiny. Does this give Abbate the basis for a rejoinder? She might argue that if my criticisms work, they prove too much. It wouldn't only follow that cats should be kept indoors, but that humans should be kept in too. After all, we cause far more harm to animals than they do! (Consider, for instance, the average number of animal deaths for which the average American meat-eater is responsible.)

The analogy doesn't work. In general, it's wrong to restrict the freedom of full moral agents who aren't under our care, even when they are acting wrongly. By contrast, when individuals *aren't* full moral agents and *are* under our care, it's often the case that we *ought* to restrict their freedom. Recall the story I told at the beginning, which works because of the son's cognitive disability. If we imagine a different version where the son is 21, has no disability, and is simply reckless, then it seems wrong to lock him up in your house. It's tragic, of course, that he endangers others, but that's a problem for the law to address—not private citizens. (Maybe it's the case that, in an animal-respecting political order, people *would* be restrained for harming animals. But sadly, that is not the world in which we live.)

Admittedly, there's no joy in preventing cats from roaming; there's no pleasure in frustrating them. But relationships of care are often difficult in exactly this way. So, I grant that attentive caregivers will want to let their cats roam freely and would be worse caregivers if they didn't have that desire. If they're responsible, though, they'll keep their cats indoors.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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