CHAPTER 4

The Values Problem

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we look at the ethical dimensions of the cat debate. This reflects our conviction that while the debate is about science, it is not only about science. And while it is a conflict between different kinds of animals, it is also, perhaps most importantly, a conflict between different human communities with diverse experiences, locations, and interests. One of our main claims throughout this book is that social factors shape the ways people interpret their own experiences as well as scientific data: what questions they ask, where they look for answers, which authorities they find credible, and how they understand and use the information they receive. We explore these sociological aspects in depth in the next chapter. Here we delve into another aspect that is often left out of debates about outdoor cats: the role of philosophical convictions and deeply held moral commitments. These ideas shape the way people understand the conflict, think about the different actors involved, and evaluate different management options. It is thus impossible to understand the debates about outdoor cats, much less find constructive answers, without close attention to the ethical dimensions of these discussions.

In order to understand the moral dimensions of the conflict, we provide a short overview of relevant moral theories, with particular attention to the ways these different models frame the issues at stake, prioritize
values, and guide ethical decisions. This section provides the context for understanding the perspectives and issues at stake in the cat debate and, equally important, the prospects for achieving resolutions that are morally and scientifically sound as well as socially acceptable.

Following this background, the rest of this chapter focuses on the relationship between environmental ethics and animal ethics, the two fields that reflect ways of thinking about the moral dimensions of nonhuman nature. Because they define and value nature quite differently, they are often in conflict. Environmental ethicists usually prioritize wild nature and ecological wholes, such as species and ecosystems. Animal ethicists, on the other hand, usually assign primary value to individual sentient creatures, including domesticated ones. The differences between these two ways of understanding and valuing nature lie at the heart of the conflicts over outdoor cats.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

**Core Values and Claims**

Environmental ethics is concerned with the meaning and moral value of nonhuman nature and human obligations to it. Traditional ethical theories pay little if any attention to nature, and in particular they do not make the core claim of environmental ethics: that nature has moral value and that humans consequently have obligations toward nature. Thus environmental ethics is founded on a novel, even radical approach to moral theorizing that makes it difficult to adopt, wholesale, any established framework. Still, most environmental ethicists draw on themes and approaches from mainstream philosophical models, including arguments about the source and character of rights, the foundations of value claims, and the relations between intrinsic and instrumental value. Among environmental philosophers there are heated debates about issues such as what parts of nature have value, what kind of value they have, where that value originates, and what precisely humans should do.

The origins of environmental ethics are often traced to a single essay, Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic” (1949). Leopold was a forester, not a philosopher, and “The Land Ethic” is far from a comprehensive, systematic analysis. Nonetheless, it sets out the core moral claims that continue to define environmental ethics today. Ethics, according to Leopold, are
about social living—norms and guidelines for proper conduct in relations with others. Past ethics have addressed only relations between humans; now we need a “land ethic,” which “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (Leopold, 1949, p. 239). When people understand their moral communities to include nonhuman nature as well as other people, they will no longer view nature purely in economic and instrumental terms or think of themselves as “conquerors” (p. 240).

The heart of Leopold’s land ethic lies in his assertion that ecological wholes have value that is not reducible to the sum of their individual parts. As Callicott (1989) summarizes, the land ethic “not only has a holistic aspect; it is holistic with a vengeance” (p. 84). This holism means that the preservation of the whole can and often does justify harm to or even destruction of individuals within the community. This sets the land ethic apart from the dominant theoretical models in modern Western philosophical ethics. This holism is also the root cause of the conflict between environmental advocates and cat advocates in the cat debate.

Environmental philosophers ground their holism with appeals to ecological and evolutionary science. Ecosystems cannot survive and species cannot evolve without the premature deaths of many individual natural entities. To try to protect individuals at the cost of these larger natural processes is ultimately counterproductive. Again, these arguments are common in discussions about the ecological impact of outdoor cats and appropriate policy responses.

The land ethic’s holism and its faith in science are shared by most other models in environmental ethics. They differ, however, on a number of issues, including which aspects of nonhuman nature have value, the basis of that value, and human obligations. These philosophical disagreements do not always have significant practical consequences, however, since even people who disagree about the ultimate source of natural value still find many areas of consensus on policy matters. This is true in regard to global issues, such as climate change, and also many local issues, such as habitat preservation or environmental justice. While there is never perfect unity, in general philosophically diverse approaches in environmental ethics agree that the unit of value in nonhuman nature is wild, native, and collective. Philosophically, this constitutes an ecocentric approach, in which ecosystems and other ecological wholes (such as native wild species or populations) have primary, sometimes exclusive value. This means that
when it is necessary to choose between the good of the whole and the welfare of individual creatures, environmental philosophers almost always prioritize the former.

The same value hierarchy shapes most environmental policy and activism. Even efforts to preserve a particular species are generally based on the ecological significance of that species, and often on arguments that protecting one species (especially large predators such as bears, wolves, or panthers) will have the practical effect of protecting habitat needed by many other native animals and plants. In general, then, the welfare of individual animals—their feelings, experiences, and capacities—does not enter into environmental arguments, theoretical or practical.

This helps us make sense of the debates about outdoor cats. This issue is sometimes discussed, in environmental philosophy and advocacy, as an example of the contradiction between concern for the individual and concern for the whole. Because ecocentric approaches always favor the latter, they support policies that preserve ecological processes, wild species, and the long-term good of the ecological community, even if that requires harm or destruction of individual creatures. This is true even in regard to native wild animals, such as white-tailed deer. Environmental thinkers and advocates generally accept deer hunting as ecologically acceptable, perhaps even desirable, in order to prevent population growth that might threaten forests and associated animal and plant species.

When domesticated species are the ones posing the threat, the environmentalist consensus is even stronger. Domesticated and feral animals cause damage in multiple ways, according to most ecocentric analyses: they kill native plants and animals directly, they compete with native species for food, and they often damage habitats in other ways as well. In addition, because domesticated species result from human intervention in nature, they lack the value possessed by wild and native species, according to many environmental philosophers. Some even describe domesticated animals as inferior or defective creatures. Rolston (1988), for example, explains that “A gazelle is pure wild grace, but a cow is a meat factory, pure and simple” (p. 83). From this perspective, cows, like chickens, pigs, dogs, and cats, are human artifacts rather than natural entities, and like humans, they frequently threaten wild nature. This attitude lies behind the fights over outdoor cats, which is often cited as an example of the conflict between wild nature and domestic creatures. For most environmental advocates, the choice is clear: the former must be preserved, even if that requires harming or destroying the latter.
Practical and Policy Dimensions

These philosophical approaches and debates provide a context for thinking about the practical aspects of the “cat wars.” Ecological holism guides most environmental organizations’ positions regarding outdoor cats, thus providing a clear hierarchy of value: wild, native species and places must be protected from the threats posed by human creations like cats. This basic principle guides the concrete policies articulated by environmental advocacy organizations regarding TNR and other management strategies. The most explicit and detailed positions have been developed by bird-oriented groups such as the Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy. We detail these positions elsewhere in this book, but we will mention just one example here to illustrate the anti-TNR position: the approach of Chicago Wilderness (CW), a regional environmental group. CW’s position on outdoor cats reflects both the content and tone adopted by many environmental, and especially bird, advocates in their positions on feral cats. The CW statement, which the American Bird Conservancy posts as a model, asserts that “feral cats, and domestic cats that are let outside unattended, kill hundreds of millions of birds and more than a billion small mammals in the United States each year” (Chicago Wilderness, n.d., para. 2). CW also cites various public health threats posed by outdoor cats, as well as asserting that most outdoor cats have short and sickly lives. They sum up their position thus: “Chicago Wilderness supports efforts to encourage responsible pet ownership, to keep domestic cats indoors or controlled on a leash, and to manage feral cat overpopulation by establishing alternatives to feral cat colonies” (para. 2). The statement is typical not only in content—its claims about the dangers posed by cats and the miserableness of their lives—but also in its tone. It never comes out directly in support of lethal control, but hints at it with the mention of “alternatives to feral cat colonies,” which means alternatives to TNR. Since truly feral cats cannot be adopted, and even friendly, sociable cats are often euthanized in shelters, the “alternatives” are leaving the cats alone with no management, which CW and other conservationists strongly oppose, or killing them.

The arguments echo the issues raised in the Ted Williams controversy, Cat Wars, and other accounts discussed in this book’s introduction. Even extreme versions, such as Williams’s call for “selective poisoning,” reflect core principles that motivate the opponents of TNR. First, they see natural value primarily and perhaps exclusively in ecological wholes, such as species and ecosystems. Second, they discount the value of domesticated species,
perceiving feral animals as out of their proper places and thus disposable. The Audubon Society sums it up thus: outdoor cat owners “seem set on putting their cats first and nature second” (Cudmore, 2015).

Outdoor cats are an important issue especially for bird advocates such as the Audubon Society and the Bird Conservancy, but even conservationists not focused on birds believe that outdoor cats are a serious ecological threat and oppose TNR. The nation’s (and the world’s) largest environmental advocacy organization, the Sierra Club, does not appear to have an explicit policy position on outdoor cats. However, local and state Sierra groups (which are affiliated with the national club) have supported removal of cats in numerous local situations. For example, several years ago the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced a plan to trap and remove feral cats from the Florida Keys because they posed a threat to native wildlife. The USFWS acknowledged that many of the trapped cats would be considered unadoptable and euthanized. According to a news account, “Conservation groups including the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation and the American Bird Conservancy have voiced support for the plan, saying birds and local endangered species have few defenses against predatory cats that don’t belong in Keys wild areas” (United Press International, 2013, para. 5).

The club’s magazine, Sierra, also published a favorable interview with Peter Marra, one of the authors of Cat Wars. The interviewer’s last question is “Why are you so passionate and outspoken about cats?” Marra responded, “We’re in the middle of the sixth great extinction. The causes are very complex. Habitat loss and climate change are difficult to manage. But cats are something we can do something about. My eyes are wide open. I wouldn’t be a responsible scientist if I said nothing” (Woolston, 2016, para. 15). Readers of Sierra, which is mailed to all of the club’s two million members, receive a clear message: outdoor cats are unequivocally bad for nature, and responsible scientists—and responsible citizens—must work to ensure their removal from the environment.

In sum, environmentalists approach outdoor cats from an ecocentric position in which natural value inheres in wholes rather than individuals and in native wild species rather than domesticated ones. While few come out as explicitly in favor of lethal control as Williams, most oppose TNR and feral colonies while insisting that outdoor cat populations must decrease, which in practice means that cats must be caught and killed. This sets them squarely in opposition to animal welfare advocates who view
TNR as a moderate and balanced solution, which controls outdoor cat populations without requiring the direct killing of healthy cats. In order to understand the philosophical and ethical principles that undergird this position, we turn now to animal ethics.

**ANIMAL ETHICS**

**Core Values and Claims**

Like environmental philosophers, animal ethicists draw on traditional moral theories while also innovating in many ways. Two main philosophical models dominate discussions within animal ethics: rights-based (deontological) and utilitarian models. The two models generally are understood to be in conflict, since they represent fundamentally different approaches to the sources of value. For rights theories, individuals have absolute value, which cannot be violated in pursuit of collective or aggregate goods. On the other hand, utilitarians assert that value inheres in consequences, and moral decisions should be aimed at maximizing aggregate benefits: the greatest good for the greatest possible number. Despite their differences, these two models have both been fruitful sources of theorizing about the value of nonhuman animals for contemporary thinkers.

Utilitarianism has been especially important in animal ethics, beginning with Jeremy Bentham’s assertion, nearly 250 years ago, that animal suffering was morally relevant:

> The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? (1781, chapter XVII, section 1)
Bentham’s initial foray into animal advocacy has been taken up by the Australian utilitarian Peter Singer, whose book *Animal Liberation* argued that “the ethical principle on which human equality rests requires us to extend equal consideration to animals too” (Singer, 1990, p. 1). Singer rejected “speciesism” as an arbitrary and unjustified form of discrimination, akin to racism or sexism. The guiding utilitarian principle—avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure—applies to all sentient beings, both Bentham and Singer asserted. Because humans and many other animal species are equally capable of feeling pain and pleasure, they have an equally relevant moral claim to avoid pain. Thus humans have an obligation not to cause pain to sentient nonhuman creatures, just as they have in regard to other humans.

The other major stream within animal ethics is deontological, and specifically rights-based. Rights approaches argue that individual creatures have intrinsic moral value, based on the possession of morally relevant qualities. These qualities vary according to different thinkers, but commonly include sentience, sociability, or intelligence. Because of these qualities, individuals who possess these qualities must never “be treated as if they exist as a resource for others,” as Regan argues (2004, xvii). Regan’s book *The Case for Animal Rights* is the fullest expression of animal rights theory. Regan cites extensive research on animal behavior to show that there is no scientific or philosophical justification for imposing a strong dividing line between humans and other species, at least in regard to the right to be treated with respect and not made to suffer in the pursuit of human goals or interests. The rigorous and detailed philosophical argument for a theory of moral rights, such as that articulated by Regan, reflects a different and much more narrow use of the term “animal rights” than the popular usage. “Animal rights” is commonly employed to describe organizations such as PETA as well as ideas, of all philosophical sorts, which generally advocate for better treatment of animals. Even Singer, a utilitarian who rejects the notion of moral or natural rights on philosophical grounds, is frequently called an “animal rights” advocate. In this book we will strive to distinguish between animal rights as a philosophical position and animal rights as a broad, theoretically pluralistic advocacy stance.

While utilitarian and rights theories are by far the most influential in Western philosophical ethics generally as well as animal ethics, a number of other theoretical models also are important for thinking about human obligations to other animals. In particular, a number of thinkers have applied feminist care ethics to animal issues. Care ethicists challenge the
rationalism and universalism of dominant philosophical approaches and instead assert that interpersonal relationships have important and perhaps primary moral value. Because of this, care ethicists often devote most of their attention to domesticated animals, which is also a common focus of animal ethicists more generally. When animal ethicists do pay attention to wild species, they often assert that humans’ primary obligation is to leave them alone—as Regan puts it, in regard to wild animals, “what we ought in general to do is . . . nothing” (2004, p. xxxvii).

Despite their theoretical disagreements, most animal ethicists share several core principles. The most important is a rejection, at least in part, of what Singer calls *speciesism* and other thinkers term *human exceptionalism*: the notion that humans alone have moral value. Instead, animal ethicists and advocates propose versions of species egalitarianism, according to which at least some nonhuman species deserve moral consideration. In addition, animal ethicists assert that the intrinsic value of individual animals generates moral obligations on the part of people. Thus activism and policy are a major concern of most animal ethicists.

In these arenas, the philosophical divisions within animal ethics do not translate directly. Rather, the most important distinction is between what are usually termed *rights* and *welfare* perspectives. Rights-oriented groups and activists pursue “abolitionist” positions on many issues, meaning they seek the end of the instrumental use of animals in many institutions, ranging from agriculture to entertainment. Abolitionists often also reject pet keeping as innately exploitative, even beyond instances of individual cruelty to cats or dogs.

In contrast, “welfarists” generally aim not to end the human use of animals, but rather to regulate and reform this use to end cruelty, promote more humane conditions, and support positive relationships between humans and animals. For example, on the issue of animals in agriculture, welfarists seek to improve conditions while abolitionists often want to end animal agriculture altogether. On a number of issues, however, theoretical distinctions do not lead to clear policy differences, including many of the debates over outdoor cats.

**Practical and Policy Dimensions**

Major animal welfare organizations, including the two giants, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), strongly support TNR and
oppose lethal solutions such as poisoning or catch and kill. The HSUS prefers that cat owners keep their pets indoors, but also recognizes that there is a large outdoor cat population and we have not yet reached a time when “all cats live in loving homes.” Until that time, the HSUS “supports and promotes humane management of outdoor cat populations,” meaning, specifically, support for TNR programs at the local level and also “legislation that allows for and supports non-lethal population control, and coalition-based approaches that involve community leaders, citizens, and stakeholders to implement effective community cat management programs. Programs that attempt to use lethal control to eliminate cat populations are inhumane, ineffective, and wasteful of scarce resources” (HSUS, n.d., para. 11).

Similarly, the ASPCA cites scientific research that shows that alternatives to TNR programs, including lethal strategies, “have been shown to be impractical, ineffective, and often inhumane. With the exception of closed populations of cats on islands, attempts to eradicate cat colonies almost universally failed. Cats who are removed are replaced through reproduction, the movement of other cats into the territory and the addition of lost and abandoned animals who repopulate the vacated space” (ASPCA, n.d., para. 5). The ASPCA does note that in “ecologically sensitive” areas, trapping and relocating cats is a humane and ecologically sound policy. Both the ASPCA and the HSUS, along with cat-specific organizations such as Alley Cat Allies, strongly support TNR as the centerpiece of a multifaceted approach to reducing outdoor cat populations, avoiding the spread of disease in cats, avoiding public health risks to humans, and minimizing the ecological damage done by the cats.

Animal rights organizations are less certain about TNR. As noted earlier, PETA, the largest rights organization in the United States, “sadly” concludes that TNR is not in the cats’ best interests. According to PETA’s explanation of its position on TNR, cats who “must fend for themselves outdoors” often “suffer and die horrible deaths.” This is the primary reason that PETA concludes that “we cannot in good conscience advocate trapping and releasing as a humane way to deal with overpopulation” (PETA, n.d.-a, para. 1). However, PETA argues against TNR programs on very different grounds than the Audubon Society and other bird or wilderness advocates. The organization notes that “Advocates argue that feral cats are just as deserving as other felines and that it is our responsibility to alleviate their suffering and assure their safety. We absolutely
agree. It is precisely because we would never encourage anyone to let their own cats outdoors to roam that we do not encourage the same for feral cats” (PETA, n.d.-a, para. 2). In this perspective, supporting TNR programs and otherwise managing feral cat colonies is the moral equivalent of abandoning personal pets.

While PETA diverges from welfarist organizations like the HSUS and APSCA by opposing TNR, it is possible to identify some common moral principles. In particular, PETA shares the welfarist insistence that individual animals, including members of domesticated species, have intrinsic value and interests that should be respected. Its opposition to TNR rests not on grounds of ecological holism, but on the interests of the cats themselves. Here the ethical complexity of this issue becomes apparent. Welfarists share some fundamental values with rights advocates, particularly the conviction that policy solutions should consider the interests of the cats themselves. Despite these shared values, they end up supporting divergent policy options.

Unlike both welfarist and rights streams within animal ethics, most environmental activists do not attribute intrinsic value to individual creatures, especially members of domesticated species like cats. Their concern for native wild birds rests on fundamentally different philosophical grounds than animal advocates’ concern for cats. Thus, birds and other native wild animals have value not as sentient individuals, but as aspects of larger ecological wholes.

Despite their divergent ethical claims, rights advocates like PETA find themselves on the same side of the TNR debate as ecocentric holists. This theoretical complexity is reflected at the practical level. Both philosophical disagreements and pragmatic coalitions emerge in relation to TNR programs, which have become the center of the debate about outdoor cats. One reason that TNR has become so important is because it shifts the discussion to management options rather than straightforward killing. Despite the sound and fury associated with the “cat wars,” it is important to keep in mind that with few exceptions, neither animal rights advocates nor bird advocates can bring themselves to support killing cats as a general policy. Those who break with this reticence, such as Williams, face harsh and immediate rebuke from almost all sides. Given the fact that most people reject a blanket policy of rounding up and killing outdoor cats, we need to look elsewhere for humane, effective, and socially acceptable solutions.
ETHICS AND THE CAT DEBATE

While the cat debate is not only, or mainly, a philosophical debate, the positions of animal and environmental ethicists encompass the core of the perceived conflict between wild nature and individuals of a domesticated species. We have outlined these positions above in the sections on environmental and animal ethics. Here we want to subject these positions to an ethical analysis, to identify core differences and commonalities and, thus, better understand the prospects for philosophical and strategic agreements.

In this approach, we adopt a broadly pragmatist perspective. Pragmatism rejects foundational moral claims and fixed goals, and instead prioritizes problem solving. It is a kind of “ethical empiricism” (Stevenson, 1961–62, p. 78) in which moral judgment is inseparable from empirical knowledge. Just as scientific knowledge emerges through experimentation and testing, so does knowledge about the right thing to do. As the early pragmatist John Dewey (1957) summarizes: “The hypothesis that works is the true one” (p. 156). The goal of pragmatist ethics is not to identify universal moral laws, but rather to resolve concrete problems on the basis of good data and multiple perspectives. This has made it appealing to some environmental philosophers who want to shift away from debates about foundational claims and toward opportunities for consensus on specific issues. Bryan Norton, a prominent environmental pragmatist, explains that “we need to go after better problems, more real problems, and that we need to go after them in an activist, problem-solving context, rather than in the context of metaphysical quandaries about who or what can own its own value” (1995, p. 358).

While we do not write from a specifically pragmatist perspective, we find pragmatism helpful as a way to identify and articulate the issues at stake in the conflicts about outdoor cats. This is because we share the pragmatist interest in defining manageable problems, using accurate data, incorporating multiple points of view, identifying shared values, and developing practical solutions even when theoretical agreement is impossible. Like pragmatists, we believe that the best approach to difficult moral dilemmas, such as the conflicts over outdoor cats, “arises from practical experience and takes shape as individuals—and communities—confront problems, learn about their (and others’) values and beliefs, and adjust and progressively improve their natural and built environments” (Minteer, 2006, p. 6).
Shared Values
Although there are many differences, there are also a number of very important shared values, which we believe can provide grounds for conversation and consensus on at least some issues and strategies. One commonality is the claim that nonhuman nature and nonhuman animals—at least in certain forms and places—have moral value. Further, this value is, at least in part, intrinsic. Nonhuman nature has certain interests that do not depend merely on its usefulness to humans. This means that people cannot just do what they want or act in a purely instrumental way. We have certain obligations to certain aspects of nature, including at least some nonhuman animals.

In sum, both bird people and cat people care about at least some aspects of nonhuman nature and want to protect it. The moral complexity of the “cat wars” stems from the fact that even people who think we have obligations to some animals disagree on which animals matter and what specifically we ought to do for, or about, them. Both environmental and animal ethicists assert that people should take care of animals and leave wild nature alone, from various perspectives. However, the situation of outdoor cats reveals that this dualistic model cannot solve the problem, precisely because it is not possible to separate nature and culture so neatly. Feral cats are the boundary case that reveal the fragility of the hard and fast categories we have established to try to assign meaning, value, and territory to members of other species. They reveal the wildness that lurks in even our most intimate domesticated companions, and they also reveal the possibility of communication and care even with animals who reject close contact.

Finding Common Ground
Perhaps more important than the possibility of communicating with cats is the possibility of communicating and finding ground with other humans who care about these issues. Our discussion of values has explained some of the possible reasons that polarized frames, such as “cats against birds” or “cat people” against “bird people” have emerged, based on the ways different participants understand and value nature. We now turn to the prospects for bridging the gap between what appear to be two warring parties, for moving past entrenched oppositions to find shared values and common ground.
The framing of the conflict over outdoor cats as a choice between two opposed, mutually exclusive options reflects a common approach to many ethical problems. According to this approach, ethical problems are dilemmas in which there is no ambiguity and no middle ground or possibility for consensus, because the choices are mutually exclusive. Further, it appears that one side is completely wrong and the other completely right. All the good arguments, values, and evidence are stacked on one side, and the other one is wrong, both morally and factually (Weston, 1997). When debates about important issues are portrayed in this way, it is no wonder that the rhetoric becomes heated and the prospects for constructive, collegial conversations become vanishingly few.

Without denying that moral choices can indeed be stark, we do not believe that they are always, or even usually, as black-and-white as they are often painted. We believe, in fact, that in most cases—and certainly in the “cat wars”—both (all) parties are, at least in part, “right.” More precisely, the different sides may each have legitimate claims and values. As Weston (2013) points out, many issues are in fact cases of “right versus right”: “In nearly every serious moral conflict, each side has a point. Each side speaks for something worth considering. Each side is right about something.” In such cases, we should “Ask not which side is right, but what each side is right about” (p. 312–313). This question can lead us to confront the polarized framing of the issue and the demonization of the “other side,” which can lay the groundwork for constructive problem solving and the identification of shared values.

Weston (1997) gives the example of another heated issue, the debate about abortion rights. Weston suggests that it is possible to affirm both that fetal life can have value and that women’s bodily autonomy is valuable. In the debates about outdoor cats, we can assert both that native wildlife and ecological processes matter, on the one hand, but that the lives and welfare of cats also matter. It is not logically or morally contradictory to affirm both these values, although in practice, it may be difficult to give both the same weight in all circumstances.

Another important truth that can help us identify and build on shared values is the fact that in most cases, even very controversial ones, extreme views are relatively rare. In the case of abortion, for example, few people oppose all abortions in all situations, even people who are strongly pro-life. This reluctance to be categorical stems from the fact that humans always hold multiple values, and in most real-life problems more than one of these...
values is at stake. The issue may be not which side is right, but rather, as Weston argues, what is right about each side. We care both about preserving human communities and about protecting ancient species. We can acknowledge the value in conflicting opinions when we recognize that it is not a matter of one side being all right and the other all wrong. In fact, most ethical problems involve conflicts between real goods—that is why ethical questions arise (Weston, 1997). If moral choices were really as clear-cut as they are portrayed, they would not be dilemmas but in fact easy choices.

When we acknowledge that multiple values are involved and that all sides have at least some legitimate claims, it becomes possible to look for solutions that integrate important values from both sides. From this perspective, compromise is not a sign of weakness or lack of commitment, but rather an acknowledgment of the diversity of legitimate values at stake and an attempt to honor them all, at least in part. Difficult and heated conflicts, whether about abortion or outdoor cats, can be seen not as simple clashes between good and evil, but rather reminders that our values, like our societies, are diverse and complex (Weston, 1997).

This leads us to approach the “cat wars” not as an epic story of heroes and villains, but instead as a complicated set of conversations about many different things that we legitimately value and the prospects for honoring as many of these things as possible. Rather than pitting birds against cats, or bird people against cat people, we could affirm that there is value in birds and cats, in wild native ecosystems and human social collectives, and in the people who care about all of these things. This affirmation is an important starting point for conversation, although by itself, it does not take us very far along the path toward effective, practical solutions.

We will address the possibilities for such solutions later in this book, but we want to make a few more points about their ethical dimensions here. First, careful moral analysis can help us reframe problems in a way that makes them more amenable to constructive, widely accepted solutions. Too often we engage in what Weston (1997) calls “freezing the problem,” by which he means we act as though all we can do is cope with the problem, accommodate ourselves to it, and react after it has happened. Instead, he suggests, we might ask whether the problem itself can be changed, made less serious, or even avoided entirely. One way to do this is to look carefully at the relevant empirical data to ask if, and to what extent, it supports the framing of the problem. Are there clear grounds for believing that we face a stark choice between two mutually exclusive alternatives? In real life, this is rarely the case.
In regard to outdoor cats, we must read the research on outdoor cat predation carefully to determine if cats are always, in all places, a grave threat to wild songbirds. Our reading of the scientific research reveals a threat that is more localized than some TNR opponents describe. This suggests that we can, in many cases, reframe the problem so that it is not a choice between killing all the cats, on the one hand, and letting the cats kill all the birds, on the other.

The second practical tip that we can offer, from the perspective of ethics, is to translate shared values into a common language. When we are sharply divided on important questions, Weston (2013) writes, ethics should not entrench us further, but rather “find ways to think and act together when we do have basic disagreements but must still work out some shared values to live by. The main way we do so is by finding shareable terms and arguments” (p. 61). One way to do this is to focus on interests, not positions. Portraying the conflicts surrounding TNR as a war between cat people and bird people emphasizes hardened positions, rather than the values or interests at stake. If we can reframe the debate as a conversation about how best to protect animals, ecosystems, and social communities, we can highlight the shared values and interests rather than entrenched ideological and emotional commitments. Everyone may have to compromise, but no one will have to give up everything that matters to them.

**Finding Help in Pragmatism**

Many of Weston’s suggestions echo the approach of philosophical pragmatism. As we noted earlier, pragmatism rejects philosophical absolutes and focuses on finding common ground in order to solve concrete problems. It also emphasizes critical, careful, and impartial reading of scientific data. These traits make pragmatism especially useful in situations—such as the “cat wars”—when multiple values are at stake, multiple individuals and groups are involved, and broad philosophical agreement is elusive. Because of its focus on practical problem solving and consensus building, pragmatism has long been engaged in debates about public issues and possible solutions to them. Its origins, in fact, lie in the desire of Dewey and other founding thinkers to solve thorny problems by identifying and pursuing shared goals, rather than debating value claims. This approach has become appealing to a number of environmental philosophers who want to move ahead on common practical aims without waiting to achieve an elusive, perhaps impossible, theoretical agreement. Pragmatism rejects “the notion
that we should be searching for a final and universal ethical principle (or even a smaller set of ultimate principles) to govern all of our problematic environmental situations,” as Ben Minteer (2006) explains, because this view “not only sweeps aside real moral diversity, it also fails to acknowledge that values can and do change in the context of public debate and deliberation over environmental problems and policies” (p. 7).

More recently some philosophers have explored pragmatism as a “pluralistic, fallibilistic, and flexible” model for thinking about people’s moral obligations to nonhuman animals. They find pragmatism useful in the complex, often heated issues regarding human obligations to animals because of its adaptability “to changing circumstances and practices because it is not unalterably wedded to principles that are too often divorced from people’s everyday lived experience” (McKenna & Light, 2004, p. 1). Because pragmatism rejects “either-or” dichotomies in favor of a “both-and” approach, it can be especially helpful in polarized conflicts such as the “cat wars” (p. 10).

The flexible, pluralistic, and problem-solving emphases of pragmatism are all important in our approach to the moral and policy debates about outdoor cats. We also want to highlight one additional factor, which is implied but not always emphasized by pragmatist thinkers: social and ecological context. Context is a problematic concept in ethics, since it is sometimes used to suggest an extreme moral relativism, in which there are no firm values or guidelines, merely “in the moment” responses to particular circumstances. This is not what we suggest, in relation to outdoor cats or any other environmental issue. We believe it is possible to identify moral goods that transcend shifting conditions, including democratic norms, scientific rigor, the continuation of ecological processes, and the rights of nonhuman animals to basic respect.

While we reject complete moral relativism, then, we believe that different goods may deserve more attention or priority in different settings. Morally different responses emerge not from a straightforward application of abstract values to concrete settings, but rather from careful consideration of various factors, including (but not limited to) personal and collective histories, relationships, available resources, scientific evidence, power dynamics, and likely consequences. Clare Palmer embodies this approach with her argument that we consider animals in terms of an “ethics in context,” according to which we have different obligations to different animals depending on the histories and relationships (social and ecological) involved. Like many philosophers, Palmer asserts that we have distinctive
“duties of assistance” to domesticated animals that we do not have with “wild-living wild animals.” However, unlike most other environmental and animal ethicists, Palmer (2010) also addresses a third category, animals in the “contact zone” between wild and domesticated. This includes animals in zoos and other institutional settings, wild animals living outside their native habitats (“exotics”), and also feral animals (p. 6).

Human commitments to domesticated and feral animals stem not only from responsibility for their immediate situations, but also for our role in creating them. Humans have special obligations to domesticated species, including animals living feral lives as well as those living with people. This is because we are responsible not only for their current situations, but also for their distinctive characters and capacities, and for their very existence (Palmer, 2010). Because she considers these biographical and historical factors, Palmer’s relational approach can be especially helpful for animals in the contact zone, rather than the end of spectrum cases. She defines animals in the contact zone as those in our homes and gardens, animals displaced by urban sprawl, and animals scavenging around our settlements. These animals have been neglected in both animal and environmental ethics. They are often uncharismatic, and they are outside the zone of systematic harm that is associated with the meat industry and animal research, thus falling below the radar of most work in philosophical animal liberation. A strength of her relational approach, Palmer says, is that it provides a way “to think about feral and commensal relations . . . alongside the fully wild and domesticated” (p. 166).

Palmer (2010) elaborates her arguments in relation to a number of case studies, one of which involves outdoor cats and birds they hunt. In urban and suburban settings, she points out, both feral and domesticated species are all, in their own ways, “in the contact zone; there are back stories in each case that locate them in significant relations with human beings” (p. 153). For cats and birds, she describes these relations as “layered predation” (p. 152), a more nuanced and fluid concept than two-dimensional predator-prey relations. While both birds and cats exist in the contact zone and thus generate certain responsibilities on the part of humans, the cat’s situation is distinctive because unlike the free-ranging wild birds, the cats’ “very constitution is shaped by humans” (p. 154). The contextual approach suggests that, in relation to outdoor cats, we have particular responsibilities due to their history of domestication but, at the same time, our duties may vary in different situations. For example, we have certain obligations when cats threaten endangered wild bird species, as in some island or
coastal habitats, which we do not have when cats live in disturbed urban or suburban habitats and prey only on abundant, opportunistic species.

In thinking about these contextual differences, we also are guided by social ethicist Warren Copeland’s emphasis on thinking about which values are most important in a given situation. Copeland argues, in relation to the US economy, that many goods are worth pursuing: liberty, solidarity, and equality, among others. In certain situations, however, one of those values may take precedence—for example, in a situation in which social equality is lacking, we might advocate for policies that generate greater equality rather than individual liberty. This does not mean that liberty and solidarity are not also important social goods, but it means that we need to evaluate the situation, identify which important goods are missing or overrepresented, and organize our ethical and political responses accordingly (Copeland, 1988).

In relation to outdoor cats, we can identify a number of guiding values, such as respect for sentient individual animals, preservation of ecological wholes, protection for endangered wild species, and appreciation for the emotional bonds between humans and cats. In some settings, we may need to support policies that emphasize one of these goods over the others. Thus we might, for example, support TNR programs in suburban settings in which cats do not prey on endangered species, in recognition of the cats’ intrinsic value as individuals and their special relationships with humans. We also recognize the intrinsic value of the birds they prey on, but in a disturbed ecosystem, predation by cats may fall into the same moral category as predation by wild native species such as raccoons, owls, and hawks. In a more fragile ecosystem, such as the Florida Keys, other values may come to the fore. If free-roaming cats are threatening the survival of wild species and thus the integrity of the ecosystem as a whole, it may be necessary to consider lethal control in such settings. This, in turn, does not mean that we dismiss the intrinsic value of cats as sentient individuals, but here the intrinsic value of wild or native animals and the collective survival of these species and of the larger land community take precedence.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined and analyzed the major ethical issues and approaches that are involved in the debates about outdoor cats and begun
to articulate the theoretical framework that we find most helpful. This framework emphasizes several themes.

First, ethical pluralism is a fact in every complex natural and social community. This means that different moral values are present and legitimate. These values sometimes conflict and sometimes reinforce each other, among a range of shifting relationships. The best way to resolve moral conflicts is not to oversimplify or polarize, but rather to understand the diverse values at stake and seek to honor as many of them as possible.

Second, science, like ethics, rarely speaks with one voice. This does not mean that anything goes, but it does mean that we should resist overgeneralizing. What is true in one setting may not be true in another, and we should do the hard work of gathering and analyzing data rather than leaping to conclusions. The best way to respect science is to treat it as a set of questions rather than a final answer, and the same may be true of many ethical claims as well.

Third, ethics is a process. It is not a set of firm rules or a choice between entrenched positions. Like science, ethics requires careful, sustained, and locally sensitive attention. More precisely, we understand ethics as a process of value identification, respectful and open discussion, and problem solving, in which there is no final correct solution that closes the case forever. This stance guides us in the remainder of this book as we consider and evaluate the best practical solutions to the cat debate.