



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Swart, Jac A.A. "Care for the Wild: An Integrative View on Wild and Domesticated Animals."
Environmental Values 14, no. 2, (2005): 251-263.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5936>

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Care for the Wild: An Integrative View on Wild and Domesticated Animals

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ABSTRACT

Environmental ethics has to deal with the challenge of reconciling contrasting ecocentric and animal-centric perspectives. Two classic attempts at this reconciliation, which both adopted the metaphor of concentric circles, are discussed. It is concluded that the relationship between the animal and its environment, whether the latter is human or natural, should be a pivotal element of such reconciliation. An alternative approach is presented, inspired by care ethics, which proposes that caring for wild animals implies caring for their relationship to the natural environment and thus taking action to maintain wildlife habitat. This type of care is labelled non-specific care because it is not directed towards the individual wild animal and its specific individual needs. In contrast, caring for domestic animals is called specific care because it is much more directed towards the individual animal's needs.

KEYWORDS

Ecocentric ethics; animal-centric ethics; wild animals; domestication; specific care; non-specific care

INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial issues in environmental ethics is the moral status of wild animals. On the one hand, ecocentric authors stress that wild animals should be seen as components of collective entities such as populations, species and ecosystems, i.e. as elements involved in natural processes. According to this line of thought, the moral status of a wild animal is derived from and subordi-

nate to the value of these collective entities or processes. This view is often, but not necessarily, related to the eco-ethical consideration that natural ecosystems have an intrinsic value, i.e. a value because the ecosystem is an end in itself, has valuable intrinsic properties, or has an objective – valuer-free – value (O'Neill, 1992). A practical example of this view can be found in a recent guideline from the Dutch government concerning the care and hospitalisation of seals in the Dutch Wadden Sea: ‘Generally, for these areas [‘almost natural areas’] this perspective [the ‘eco-ethic approach’] implies that seals are not considered as individuals but as parts of a larger more or less stabilised system. [...]. The self-regulating capacity of natural systems is a pivotal point of departure. The principle of integrity is authoritative. With sick and wounded animals, nature is allowed to take its course, thus not depriving them of their dignity’ (LNV, 2003: 7, translation by the author).

By contrast, animal-centric authors stress that, ethically, animals should be placed above the population, species, ecosystem or process. Individual animals have morally relevant features that collective entities lack. Sentience and the ability to suffer (Singer, 1990), being a ‘subject of a life’ (Regan, 1983), and having a good for itself (Taylor, 1986) are examples of such morally distinctive features of animals as compared to collective entities.

The conflict between these individualistic and holistic perspectives may escalate because cultural and natural domains are increasingly intertwined (Rosenzweig, 2003). Human impact on nature, caused by the cultivation, exploitation, fragmentation and pollution of natural reserves, is very intense and widespread. Wild animals are fed, hunted or captured for recreational, economic or scientific motives. Such activities may cause severe suffering and may indirectly threaten even those wild animals living relatively far away from human settlements. As a result, moral dilemmas regarding conservation and animal protection arise. For example, if a seal pup is washed ashore should we take it to a seal station, or should we leave it to its fate because that is the natural course? Should we take care of birds that become soaked with oil from a tanker disaster? Should we feed wild boars because our fences restrict their foraging area? Should we care for ungulates that are introduced into a natural reserve in order to make the area more natural?

Without integrating perspectives to answer such moral questions, arbitrary and inconsistent decisions will result. Strategic and economic interests may then be given preference over moral considerations. In order to avoid subjective and inconsistent decision-making in nature conservation, several authors have tried to reconcile or unite the different and conflicting perspectives on wild and domesticated animals and ecosystems. Peter S. Wenz (1988) and J. Baird Callicott (1989) have proposed – independently – the metaphor of concentric circles for this enterprise. The metaphor visualises the moral standing of other groups by drawing circles around the subject’s own familiar group, and had already been used by the anthropologist Edward Westermarck for the interpretation of altruis-

tic feelings towards domesticated animals (Westermarck, 1932: 205–13). More recently, Peter Singer has used the metaphor to describe the historic expansion of the human moral sphere to animals (Singer, 1983).

In his book, Wenz stresses the need for a pluralistic theory of justice ‘that enables us to appeal in a consistent manner to principles featured in a variety of theories, even when those principles cannot all be reduced to or derived from a single master principle’ (Wenz, 1988: 313). In contrast, Callicott rejects such pluralism and pleads for theoretical unity, coherence and self-consistency, not only because of basic intellectual taste but also for practical reasons: ‘a lasting alliance [...] will require the development of a moral theory that embraces both programs and that provides a framework for the adjudication of the very real conflicts between human welfare, animal welfare, *and* ecological integrity’ (Callicott, 1989: 50–51, his italics).

In this article I will discuss the contributions of Wenz and Callicott. In my view both contributions, different as they are, are very valuable. However, they also have a number of shortcomings and an alternative model based on the ethics of care is presented.

CALLICOTT'S THEORY

Inspired by Mary Midgley’s idea of the mixed community (1983) and Aldo Leopold’s concept of the biotic community (1949), but in contrast to an earlier publication (1980), J. Baird Callicott (1989) developed an integrative ethics of wild and domesticated animals. In this publication Callicott considers membership of a community as the pivotal element of a ‘biosocial moral theory’: ‘we are members of nested communities each of which has a different structure and therefore a different moral requirement’ (Callicott, 1989: 55). In the centre is the immediate family. Next come friends, neighbours and human society. Accordingly, we can have the mixed community of man and domesticated animals, and finally, in the outer circle, the biotic community in which we find wild animals: ‘Wild animals, rather, are members of the biotic community. The structure of the biotic community is described by ecology. The duties and obligations of a biotic community ethic [...] may, accordingly, be derived from an ecological description of nature – just as our duties and obligations to members of the mixed community can be derived from a description of the mixed community’ (p. 56–57). The biotic world, according to Callicott, is characterised by ‘eating ... *and being eaten*’ (p. 57, his italics). There is no right to life here because predation is part of the natural order. Man also belongs to the biotic community but ‘our holistic environmental obligations are not pre-emptive. We are still subject to all the other more particular and individually oriented duties to the members of our various more circumscribed and intimate communities. And since they are closer to home, they come first’ (p. 58).

Callicott's approach thus provides a criterion for our moral attitude towards animals and ecosystems, i.e. membership of a community. An evolutionary origin is suggested for this community-based ethics. Following Darwin, Callicott argues that 'the survival advantages of group membership to individuals more than compensate them for the personal sacrifices required by morality' (p. 54). This seems to be an example of group selection which, however, is a disputable concept in evolutionary biology (see Sober and Wilson, 1998, for a defence of this concept). Later on, Callicott stresses that the socio-biological concept of inclusive fitness is sufficient to generate altruistic behaviour towards non-kin individuals because our 'feelings are not calculating' and our ancestors did not have 'any conscious interests in the transmission [of their genes] in the currency of inclusive fitness' (Callicott, 1999A: 111). One may question whether Callicott's naturalisation of ethics is necessary because the concentric-circle metaphor can also be interpreted as a social or rational device. One problem with such a community-based ethics, whether rooted naturally, culturally, or both, is that it ignores the supposition that truly moral behaviour relies on reflective consideration (Taylor, 1975). Despite feeling constrained to behave in particular ways, for example co-operatively or altruistically, we can decide after all, on ethical grounds, to behave in some other way. From my point of view, a community can be the initiating but not the ultimate authority for moral behaviour, although the process of reflection can end, of course, with community ethics.

Another issue concerns the relative impact of the hierarchically related circles. The ethics of the outer circles are overruled by those of the inner circles. It follows that we have to take care of and are responsible for animals that belong to our community, the so-called mixed community, but not for wild animals in the outer biotic community. However, the outer circles do have a moral impact on the inner circles. Which circle-related morality prevails in concrete situations, however, is not clear (Klaver et al., 2002). Additional criteria seem to be required, as is later admitted by Callicott (1999B: 73) when he proposes so-called second-order principles in reply to this criticism. Such ordering, however, does not follow from the concentric circle theory itself.

WENZ'S THEORY

According to Peter S. Wenz (1988), the central determinant of our moral behaviour is our relationship to someone or something, and this can be visualised by concentric circles in which closer circles express stronger or more numerous obligations: 'Other things being equal, I have stronger and/or more numerous obligations to satisfy the preferences of others as they occupy closer concentric circles'. Closeness is expressed by mutual interactions, 'not formally tied to emotional or to subjective feelings of closeness' (p. 316). Because of the number and strength of the interactions, we usually experience more obligations to our children, friends and colleagues than to people we do not know. Closeness as a

morally relevant criterion breaks with the utilitarian view that we should behave in order to maximise the total benefits for the maximum number of involved agents, although the severity of involved needs also counts. For example, food for a starving child on the other side of the world is more important than the next toy for a child in the Western world.

An important element in Wenz's approach is the concept of positive and negative rights stemming from political philosophy. Positive rights refer to active efforts by others to fulfil someone's needs, such as the right to education, medical care, etc. Negative rights refer to the right not to be affected by somebody else, for example freedom of speech or the right to privacy. According to Wenz, the closer someone is, the more he or she may expect the fulfilment of positive rights: 'Other things being equal, I have stronger and/or more obligations concerning the positive rights of others as they occupy closer concentric circles' (Wenz, 1987: 316). However, negative rights are not related to closeness. Wenz refers to the animal right theory of Regan (1983) for this: 'Negative rights apply to all subjects-of-a-life, regardless of placement on a concentric circle' (Wenz, 1987: 317). The subject-of-a-life concept relates rights to the animal's capability to experience welfare which is of course not dependent on closeness.

Wenz applies these concepts to our relationship with animals. Domesticated animals are closer to us and thus have positive rights. As a consequence, we have to care for them. Wild animals are at a very great distance from us. They do not have positive rights and are left with only negative rights. They must live their own lives and we do not need to intervene to ensure their welfare.

In order to reconcile animal-centric and ecocentric approaches, Wenz places evolutionary processes in the remote spheres of his model and explains that the logic for this is derived from their great value: 'Since evolutionary processes that increase biotic diversity have been indispensable for the production of what we consider to be among the world's greatest goods – i.e., ourselves – such processes should not be harmed lightly. [...] Our obligation is merely to avoid impairing the health of the ecosystem as a whole, because healthy ecosystems are necessary for the relevant process of evolution' (p. 329–30).

Wenz's concentric circle theory contains circularity in the argument. He states that 'the closer our relationship is to someone or something, the greater the number of our obligations in that relationship, and/or the stronger our obligations in that relationship'. Only a few lines further on, he says that 'Closeness is defined in terms of the strength and the number of one's obligations to others' (p. 316). Substitution of both phrases reveals the tautology: we have obligations to those to whom we have obligations. It is thus not clear why interactions lead to obligations. Of course, in human society interactions are often related to obligations. Wenz provides numerous examples, including reciprocal benefits, commitments, promises, shared ideals, etc. (p. 318). However, these obligations do not arise because of the interactions; it can also be the other way round – they may entail interactions. Moreover, the examples suggest a sort of contract ethics which is questionable in the case of animals because they are not rational beings

and do not have the power to make or to cancel such contracts in the context of domestication (Palmer, 1995).

Another criticism concerns the concept of positive and negative rights. According to Wenz, positive rights are and negative rights are not related to closeness. However, a negative right that serves to protect someone from interference by others excludes a positive right that requires the same type of interference. They may thus exclude each other. In our day-to-day human experience we may, for example, experience that a positive right of security may require a duty of identification which may interfere with the negative right of privacy. Analogously, a domesticated animal's right to receive care restricts its negative right to live its own life. This mutually exclusive relationship is not absolute, however. For example, a ban on seal hunting as a negative right of seals does not exclude their hospitalisation as a possible positive right. However, if we limit human accessibility to a natural area because of the animal's negative right not to be disturbed, we will limit our capacity to provide care as a possible positive right. Likewise, a ban on hunting may imply animals starving when population control by hunting ceases. In general, positive and negative rights with respect to animals are negatively related if they are mediated by the same type of interaction between man and animals.

A third problem, in my view, is the position of evolutionary processes in the outer sphere of Wenz's model. Wenz admits that 'nonsentient constituents of the environment do not have rights' (p. 317). He nevertheless places the evolutionary process in his model of individual rights. His integration of ecocentric and animal-centric approaches is therefore not very convincing. Moreover, the intended integration of these approaches fails because the value of the evolutionary processes is derived from what belongs to the greatest goods, i.e. 'ourselves'. In this, Wenz bypasses the fundamental canon of ecocentrism, i.e. the intrinsic value of ecosystems as a value that cannot be derived from human values.

RELATIONSHIPS

The role of the concentric circles differs strongly in the two theories. In Callicott's approach the circles have an inclusive role: each community, except the central human community, includes one or more other communities. Wenz's theory does not imply such an inclusion; his circles represent the animal's relational closeness to humans in the centre. The moral consideration of animals in both theories depends on the distance to humans, meaning either inclusion in a community or a relationship with humans. Perhaps unintentionally, both theories thus suggest therefore a sort of anthropocentrism, with man being given a central position which is inconvenient for the ecocentric elements in both theories. For this reason, as well as previously mentioned criticisms, we may question the usefulness of the metaphor of the concentric circles.

As an alternative, I propose to focus on the concept of relationship on which both theories actually rely. In Wenz's account, relationship arises in the context of actual or potential interactions between man and animals. Callicott's concept of membership of a community implies relationships with and in the community. The relationships described in both theories are not autonomous but are characterised by dependencies. On the one hand, there is domestic animals' dependence on humans or the human environment, and on the other hand, because ecosystem conditions and population dynamics largely determine their lives, there is wild animals' dependence on the natural environment. These two positions can be considered as endpoints on a continuum of domestication in which we find, for example, domestic, livestock, feral, scavenging, reintroduced and wild animals (Palmer, 1995; Klaver et al., 2002).

Although domestication is often related to biological traits, the most important element is the changed environment to which animals become adapted and therefore depend on. According to Clutton-Brock, a domesticated animal 'has been bred in captivity for purposes of economic profit to a human community that maintains complete mastery over its breeding, organisation of territory, and food supply. The morphological changes that are produced in the animal follow after this initial integration' (Clutton-Brock, 1981: 21). Elsewhere she states that domestication should be considered as a biological and cultural process through which 'tamed animals are incorporated into the social structure of the human group and become objects of ownership' (Clutton-Brock, 1989: 7). This is in accordance with Hettinger and Throop (1999) who state that 'something is wild in a certain respect to the extent that it is not humanised in that respect. An entity is humanised in the degree to which it is influenced, altered or controlled by humans.' Wild animals are thus characterised by a dependent relationship with wild nature, domesticated animals by a dependent relationship with human society. Domestication can be seen as a process that leads to animals' increased dependence on human social systems, such as private households, farming or scientific research, instead of dependence on the natural environment.

SPECIFIC AND NON-SPECIFIC CARE

Human relations and dependencies are fundamental concepts in the ethics of care evolved in the eco-feminist context (e.g. Tronto, 1993). This tradition criticises the dominance of the political-liberal concept of autonomy and stresses that in daily reality people are significantly dependent on other people and societal institutions. Acknowledging the relationship to the environment as a constituting condition for the subsistence of animals, several authors have recognised the ethic of care as a promising perspective (e.g. Curtin, 1991; O'Neil, 2000).

According to Fisher and Tronto, caring can be viewed 'as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world"

so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web' (cited in Tronto, 1993: 103). Valuing, respecting or feeling affection for animals, for whatever reason, also implies valuing and respecting the constitutive relationships on which they depend. Considerations of care are often thought to apply more to domestic animals, which are dependent on us for their welfare and subsistence, than to wild animals. For example, the bio-ethicist Verhoog (1992: 274) states: 'By making an animal's survival and well-being dependent on human action, man has become responsible for it, whereas such responsibility does not exist with respect to wild animals'. This is in line with Brian Norton who says: 'By deciding to respect their wildness, we have agreed not to interfere in their daily lives or deaths' (Norton, 1995: 105).

It is true that wildness implies the absence of a personal relationship between man and animal but it does not imply the absence of the obligation of caring because caring is not restricted to dyadic relations and also includes caring 'for objects, and for the environment, as well as for others' (Tronto, 1993: 103). If, as put so nicely by Norton, we respect wild animals and realise that wildness means a strongly dependent relationship with the natural environment, then we must care for that relationship and for the natural environment. This is especially true if we recognise that human activities increasingly determine the environment of wild animals. Caring for wild animals means that we have to make efforts to maintain their living conditions and their dependent relationship with the environment. I call this type of care non-specific care because it is not directed at the individual wild animal and its specific individual needs, as is the case in caring for domestic animals. For the latter I suggest the term specific care. Specific care has an affective connotation, especially in the case of domestic animals, whereas non-specific care implies a more distant valuation. These types of care are more or less covered by the terms 'caring for' and 'caring about', respectively, although other authors use these terms in a somewhat different context (Curtin, 1991; Tronto, 1993; O'Neill, 2000).

Non-specific care consists of measures often directed at the population or at the ecosystem. For example, the development of ecological networks in rather densely populated countries in order to give wild animals the opportunity to migrate naturally can be seen as non-specific care. Restrictions on hunting, as well as controlled hunting in order to prevent starving of animals due to unnatural population growth, may also be considered as non-specific care. In general, non-specific care may be seen as measures that make it possible for wild animals to live their own lives. Non-specific care does not prevent suffering caused by natural conditions, since such conditions are a fact of life in the wild (Swart, 2004). Moreover, through the animal's learning capacity, hard and threatening conditions contribute to its ability to cope with the environment and lead to the evolutionary adaptation of the species, whereas specific care given to wild animals may have evolutionarily maladaptive consequences.

However, a total ban on giving specific care to wild animals is not defensible for various reasons. Firstly, not all suffering has an evolutionary impact since it is often just the result of bad luck. Secondly, incidental aid will often have only a negligible effect on the species' genetic make-up, while natural events which do have an evolutionary impact probably occur much more frequently and, relatively, will affect animals much more. Because of this, incidental or modest specific care for wild animals has a place alongside non-specific care. It is right to help an individual animal that is suffering or in danger.

We have a duty to domestic animals because their environment – that's us – constitutes their life. This implies giving care to the individual animal because individual circumstances determine the animal's need. However, non-specific care also applies to domestic animals, i.e. care that is not individually directed and is expressed by legislation. Examples include regulations to prevent exaggerated humanisation or exploitation of domestic or research animals.

To a certain extent specific and non-specific care exclude each other since general non-specific measures prevent active intervention in an animal's existence, but they do not rule each other out completely. Moreover, wildness and tameness must be considered as gradual concepts and, therefore, specific and non-specific care are gradually related to the level of wildness or domestication (see Figure 1).

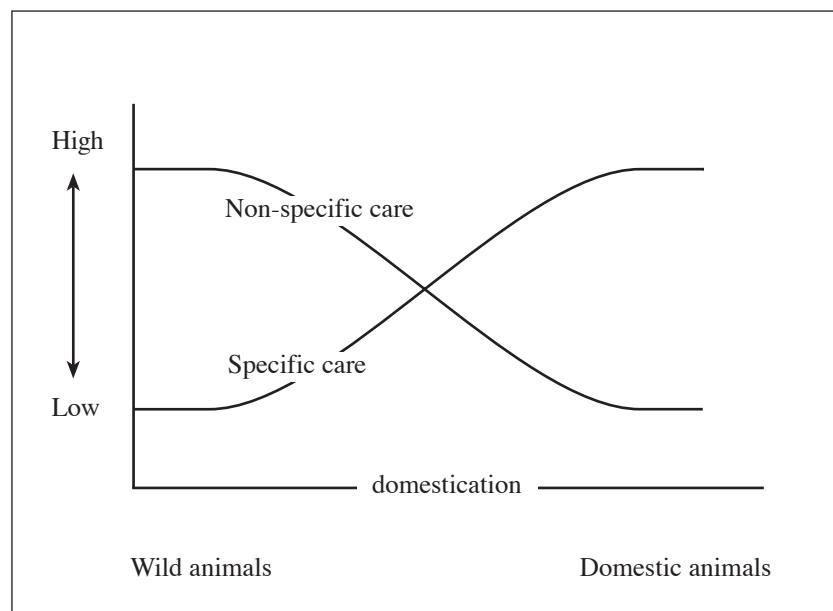


FIGURE 1. Specific care and non-specific care as a function of the level of domestication or wildness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The theory of specific and non-specific care contains elements of the approaches of both Wenz and Callicott. Callicott's concept of the community is relevant as the natural environment in my account but it does not dictate moral rules. Wenz's concept of closeness, which does not need to be described in terms of concentric circles, has been turned into a domestication gradient with domestic and wild animals at the endpoints. The anthropomorphic element of the concentric-circle approach is thus avoided without dismissing the role of man. Humans are able to change the environment of animals and are thus responsible for taking care, whether specific or non-specific. Both types of care exclude each other to some extent, but we may still provide specific care to suffering wild animals in a healthy natural environment. However, such care should not be given in a structural and institutionalised way as is the case for domestic animals.

The proposed theory supplies the care criterion of dependency as a pivotal element in our moral attitude not only towards domesticated animals, as for example already put forward by Palmer (1995), but also towards wild animals, although in a different and indirect way. Thus, leaving a dog in a forest is not only wrong because it is cruel but also because it demonstrates a lack of respect for the animal as a member of the human and mixed community. Likewise, capturing a wild animal is wrong because the animal loses the natural world on which it depends and which is replaced by an environment to which the animal is not adapted. Comparable reasoning makes it wrong to pollute, fragment or reduce the natural territories of wild animals. In this respect, while the theory has inevitable ecocentric consequences, it is not primarily an ecocentric theory. It is neither a pure animal-centric theory because of the pivotal role of relationships in spite of the fact that animals have important morally relevant features.

Ecocentric theories often derive from the concept of the intrinsic value of collective entities such as populations or ecosystems. The proposed theory starts from respect for the dependent relationship between an animal and its natural-cultural environment. It does not, however, prohibit shifting along the gradient of domestication as long as this is restricted to the adaptive range of the animal. The theory is actually neutral with respect to the ethical acceptability of domestication. However, it must be realised that shifting towards the domestic side is usually easier than shifting in the opposite direction, and that providing regular specific care may start the process of domestication which leads to increasing and probably irreversible dependence on human society. In a healthy wild population, therefore, providing medication and hospitalising wounded animals or pups left by their mothers may be counterproductive (see for example Vorstenbosch et al., 2001).

What about dedomestication or reintroduction of domestic animals into the wild? Reintroduction of animals into the wild is defended because of management

considerations, because of the animals' ecological functions, or by an appeal to an increased naturalness of ecosystems (Vera, 2000). Klaver et al. (2002: 20) argue that reintroduction into the wild is morally defensible because it expresses respect for the potential wildness of populations. Animals have learning capacities and 'respect for the potential wildness implies trust in animals' ability to fend for themselves' (their italics). Populations can indeed adapt to a changing environment by the process of intergenerational learning and evolution but the capacity of individual animals to do this is limited. Thus the reintroduction of domesticated animals into the wild should be carried out with great prudence. Shifting from specific to non-specific care can only occur gradually and may even take several generations.

In conclusion, the theory of specific and non-specific care is not an ecocentric or a pure animal-centric theory, and it does not encompass the moral acceptability of domestication and dedomestication beyond highlighting the need for prudence. As most moral theories in a practical context it has a limited scope and other considerations play a role. For example, we may wonder whether we have to respect the life of vermin, such as scavenging, semi-domesticated rats or mice species. According to the theory proposed in this article we should indeed respect their environmental relationships. However, various considerations regarding the interests of animals versus those of man can overrule the principle of care. Another example of a possibly overruling principle stems from the discussion of the practice of taking care of seals in the Netherlands. If the population of seals can be placed on the wild side in figure 1 we should be restrictive in providing institutionalised specific care, especially when domestication effects are unwanted. On the other hand, rescuing and rehabilitating seals has a long tradition in the Netherlands and has contributed to wide public support for the conservation status of the Wadden Sea. Moreover, a modest level is defendable in order to maintain the skills and infrastructure for rehabilitating animals because the need for this practice in the near future is not implausible.

The view presented in this article integrates moral perspectives on wild, domestic and 'in between' animals. However, as discussed here, there are relevant moral considerations other than simply respecting the constitutive relationship of the animal and its environment. In my opinion, unifying principles are not available, except perhaps in a very abstract way, and it is not possible to establish a definitive ordering of rules for different principles. Thus, moral practice remains a pluralist and, therefore, a discursive practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the manuscript.

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