

Applying Eurocentric food ethics to non-Western contexts: Challenges and resolutions

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Abstract

Animal ethics is a big part of food ethics. However, given the growing demand for animal food products in developing countries, ethical theorizing focuses on Western practices might lack cultural sensitivity or fail to address diverse ethical perspectives. The outbreaks of zoonotic disease and drastic loss in biodiversity in the last decades creates the need for more diverse food practices in both the Global North and South. Against this backdrop, this paper applies classic Eurocentric ethical theorizing on moral individualism and holism at the intersections of animals and the ecosystem to see in what ways they can be translated to the case of China's wild animal farming. It aims to show that the main philosophical dilemma presented in the Western context also applies to the Chinese context. However, ethical concepts that attempt to address this dilemma face difficulties in their applicability to non-Western practices. Therefore, we argue while theories of value might be universal, resolving conflicting values is culturally dependent.

Keywords: China, environmentalism, farming, policy, wildlife

Introduction

Food ethics heavily focuses on animals as animal agriculture is one of the greatest drivers of public health crises and biodiversity loss, underscoring the vital link between animal ethics and the broader field of food ethics. The way humanity breeds and consumes animals following the agricultural revolution has led to the “MacCready explosion”: where 10 000 years ago humans and livestock accounted for just 0.1% of terrestrial vertebrate biomass, now this is over 98%, and most of which are animals raised for consumption (Dennett, 2009). The rapid growth of humans' dominance over animals highlights the utmost importance of considering our ethical relationship with them.

However, much of the animal ethics literature stems from the Anglo-Saxon world, with key concepts rooted in Western contexts. This paper uses the core ethical aspects of animals and environmental ethics and examines their applicability in China's wild animal farming practices. Wild animal farming is here defined as state-led captive breeding projects to utilize a wide range of wild animals for commercial purposes, including food, medicine, fur and leather, pets, entertainment, and research. The industry has been actively encouraged by the Chinese government for decades as a means of conservation, poverty alleviation for rural communities, and meeting consumer demand for wildlife products.

The case of China is relevant because it provides a clear example of the normative difficulties that arise in our treatment of animals. China's food industry has come under intensified global scrutiny following the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, China's wild animal industry has long been subjected to global criticism for its negative impacts on nationwide and global biodiversity decline. These contentious debates underline how much our treatment of animals intersects with most aspects of modernity. This paper attempts to open the door for more refined ethical theorization that takes into account

the food politics and practices in the Global South. It explores the strengths and limitations of moral individualism and holism and highlights theory-empirics gaps in applying these concepts to a context that is novel yet consequential to sustainable food production and consumption.

Animals and Ecosystems

It is *prima facie* strange to contrast animals with ecosystems since animals are integral to ecosystems. However, in ethics, an inherent conflict exists between animal ethics and environmental ethics. This section outlines where this conflict arose theoretically and examines its applications in the case of China's wild animal farming, connecting major ethical perspectives and contradictions.

Animal ethics and moral individualism

The conflict between animal ethics and environmental ethics stems from the focus of our moral considerations being either on individual animals or ecosystems. Ethical theorizations diverge on the moral significance of animals and ecosystems. Prioritizing individual animals' well-being might entail compromises in ecosystem health, such as in tensions between "invasive species" and ecological integrity. Traditionally, animal ethics is morally individualistic, meaning that it grounds the value of animals on the attributes of individual animals (Bovenkerk and Verweij, 2016). This notion of moral individualism underpins the two most influential approaches; utilitarian and deontologist interpretations of animal ethics.

Both approaches are in the first place concerned with sentience. The exact definition of sentience is debated but it always has to do with the capacity for experience and subjectivity. For utilitarian philosophers, most notably Singer (1999), ethics centers on the ability to feel pain and pleasure. An action is morally good if it limits pain and/or maximizes pleasure. This approach is morally individualistic as only individual animals have these capabilities. A higher-order category like a species or ecosystem cannot suffer.

The deontological approach, most famously defended by Regan (1983), builds upon notions of autonomy linked to consciousness rather than sentience. Regan defends the moral consideration of all animals as they are subjects-of-a-life, based on their subjective being in the world and considerable interests to continue to live. Species, forests, ecosystems, biospheres, etc. have no subjective experience of their being in the world, and therefore no *prima facie* moral standing on their own, let alone a moral standing that trumps those of animals.

Environmental ethics and moral holism

Against approaches of moral individualism are approaches of moral holism. These state that not individual animals, but exactly those higher-order categories like ecosystems should be our first concern. These approaches arise mainly within environmental ethics, but not all branches of environmental ethics reject moral individualism. Roughly, three different positions can be discerned. First, there is the anthropocentric approach to environmental ethics, where nature is instrumentally valuable to humanity's goals. Second, there is the biocentric view, where all living things are valuable, but ecosystems as a whole are only valuable to individual things. Anthropocentric and biocentric approaches still adhere to moral individualism (Brennan, 2021).

Third, there are ecocentric approaches to environmental ethics that proclaim a form of moral holism. As with animal ethics, there is a great variety of holistic approaches to environmental ethics, but the rejection of moral individualism is central to the philosophy of ecological ethics. One of the most influential

names in environmental ethics is Leopold (1949). A central thought of his that shaped environmental ethics is that higher-order categories have a unique and delicate functioning that is worthy of protection over their constituents. Concretely this is to say that the whole is more than its parts descriptively and normatively. This leads to the logical conclusion that individual animals may be sacrificed if this protects a certain species or ecosystem.

Wildness as a bridge

Wildness is a concept where environmental and animal ethics may overlap, potentially serving as a bridge between moral individualism and moral holism. Wildness is not one clearly defined concept, but it forms the intuitions about human intervention in nature, particularly the desire to protect the pristine, of a world untouched by human intervention (i.e. Preston, 2011), now threatened by pervasive anthropogenic impacts on Earth.

More systematically, Palmer (2016) defines wildness as possible points on two axes (although more dimensions to the concept exist); constitutive wildness and self-willed wildness. Constitutive wildness is the opposite of domestication, meaning constitutively wild animals are at least: (1) not the product of selective breeding; (2) not adapted to living with humans; and (3) not being adapted for human purposes. Self-willed wildness refers to the autonomy of animals; the extent to which they live their lives according to their own choosing.

Wildness as a normative concept might reconcile the contradiction between animal and environmental ethics, bridging characteristics between the individual animal and the collective. The environment as constitutive of the wildness of an individual animal is a way to lessen the tension between holistic/environmental ethics and individualistic/animal ethics. Selective breeding, for example, is something done with individual animals but its effects play on the level of the species (Bovenkerk and Verweij, 2016). The normative value of wildness is particularly relevant but also challenged in China's wildlife-food practices, as exemplified below.

Animal ethics, environmental ethics, and wildness in China

On the dichotomy of individual (animal) ethics vs. holistic (environmental) ethics, China's food politics tend towards the latter. Compared to Western environmental ethics, traditional Chinese environmental philosophy focuses more on living harmoniously with nature rather than on the intrinsic value of nature (Yang, 2021). Food practices in modern-day China mainly reflect an instrumentalist approach to the value of nature as well as animals. Wild animals are treated as natural resources and state property. Under this rationale, the interests of individual animals are considered less important than the conservation of species or ecosystems. These are clear cases of sacrificing the well-being of individual animals (through wild capture, confinement, and selective breeding) for preserving higher-order categories, in this case, the species. Using the concept as wildness to aim for balancing this instrumentalist view with the individual interests of animals might be challenging.

"Wildness" is not a static concept in either consumption or conservation practices (Hinsley and 't Sas-Rolfes, 2020). Particularly where animals were captured in the wild and then reared in artificial environments. The rise of China's wild animal farming industry is an exemplary case. After rapid economic development resulted in significant environmental degradation and overexploitation of native species, the country has resorted to a "supply-side" approach to conserve wild animal species (Wang *et al.*, 2019). This approach uses captive breeding programs to substitute wild-sourced animals, which has been prevalent in Southeast Asia. Proponents of this approach believe increasing the supply of legal, artificially bred animals can provide economic incentives to conserve wild animal species.

While such an approach has led to mixed results for different species, artificial propagation has helped increase the populations of several critically endangered flagship species in China, including the Giant Panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) and the Crested ibis (*Nipponia nippon*) (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Though wild animals are important sources of subsistence in many developing countries, they are more often consumed by urbanites (Mainka and Trivedi, 2002), and can serve functional, social, experiential, financial, and spiritual roles (Thomas-Walters *et al.*, 2021). Since the 1950s, the captive-breeding programs of over 230 wild animal species have been built in China (Wang *et al.*, 2019). The breeding operations of several species have reached industrial scales, including turtles, fur animals, crocodiles, frogs, and deer (Chinese Academy of Engineering, 2017). However, China's wildlife legislation does not clearly define "wild animal," leading to the somewhat paradoxical concept of "artificially bred wild animals." Consequently, for many endangered animals, while their wild populations are offered legal protection and captive-breeding restrictions, their genetically identical farmed counterparts can be traded and consumed legally.

In addition, "wild animal" is often associated with terrestrial and aerial animals, while aquatic animals are typically managed as fisheries. Amphibians and reptiles (herp species) also occupy a similarly ambiguous category. As of 2016, herp species make up the largest group of wild animals bred for food in China (Chinese Academy of Engineering, 2017). After the COVID-19 outbreak, many of these animals were reclassified from terrestrial animals to aquatic, thus exempted from the wild animal consumption ban. As many biologists have stated, wildlife trade restrictions and welfare standards rarely affect herpetofauna species (Borzée *et al.*, 2021; Lambert *et al.*, 2019). Unsustainable capturing practices, poaching, and "laundering" of herp species have been prevalent (Amphibian Specialist Group IUCN, 2022; Cheung and Dudgeon, 2006; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Since these animals have a short history of domestication, many of their farming practices require sourcing eggs and restocking from wild populations (Huang *et al.*, 2021). The overproduction of these animals on the farms and their endangered state in the wild creates a phenomenon known as "being bred into extinction" (Langin, 2018; Shi *et al.*, 2007). Questions arise regarding the effectiveness of the "conservation through utilization" rationale and the future direction of commercialized wild animal breeding (Jiao and Lee, 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

Both in theory and in practice there exists a contradiction between animal and ecosystem protection. Theoretically, this has to do with a conflicting notion of moral individualism and moral holism. The case of Chinese consumption of herpetofauna shows this conflict in practice. To protect species endangered by excessive exploitation, large-scale farming has been used as a means of conservation. This approach is a clear example of prioritizing the whole (a species) over its part (individual animals), as the welfare concerns of the animals in these farms did not trump the survival concerns on the species level.

Therefore, we can argue that this ethical dilemma, which is mainly identified theoretically in the Anglo-Saxon context is very relevant in the Chinese case as well. The problems may flesh out differently on the ground-level of the politics of animal and ecosystem management, the moral-ontological conflict of value on the level of the individual versus value on aggregate levels does not corrode under the scrutiny of changing empirical contexts.

An approach aiming to bridge the gap by focusing on the intersection between the individual and the whole centers on the ethical theorization of wildness. Wildness as a concept, however, gets very blurry in the Chinese case, as its human-animal relationships and consequently, the animal-ecosystem relationship are different from the Western context. The practices of wild farming as a means of animal production are less decoupled from ecosystems. Rather, wildlife-food production is heavily integrated within natural ecosystems. This less alienated way of producing animal products, however, does not

necessarily lead to a more ecologically 'balanced' production chain, as the linking between ecosystems and animal farming leads to hybrid systems that damage both. This hybridization is a practice that blurs the boundaries of the concept of 'wild'.

This contextualization of 'Western' animal ethics in China might falsely lead to a sense of cultural relativism. However, as we have shown with the empirical application, the basic ethical dilemmas on the grounding of value are universal. We thus propose that the Chinese case on the limitations of the concept of wildness informs the limits of ethical frameworks in terms of applicability.

In proposing ways forward it is important to see how the different practices might limit our understanding of resolving ethical tensions in specific cases. This in turn should inform Western understanding of ethical relationships to nature and their universalizability. Introducing wildness as a bridge for resolving the ethical conflict between caring for animals and caring for nature is more difficult in the Chinese case. A conceptual bridge between individual animal ethics and environmental ethics may *prima facie* appear in some Chinese cases. However this happens at a great environmental cost in the short term, and animal suffering in the long term. Further, these practices lead to paradoxes in conceptualizations of wildness, as hybridization blurs the line between wildlife and livestock. This shows how wildness is an important concept in the Chinese context as well as in the Anglo-Saxon world, but the meaning of this notion is challenged severely.

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Section 6

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