

Consider the (Feral) Cat: Ferality, Biopower, and the Ethics of Predation

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Abstract

Cats confound clear distinctions: not least that between the human and natural worlds. As a consequence, they are prime examples of “ferality”: a category of nonhuman subjects who are neither domestic, nor wild, but instead move between those realms. It is argued that that potential for movement informs particular social anxieties and debates that emerge regarding cat hunting behaviors. Drawing on the biopolitical work of Michel Foucault, in conjunction with the ethical paradox of the “predator problem,” it is argued that the ethical indictment of cat predation is best understood as a consequence of cats’ abilities to move across the different regulatory and ethical spaces of the home and the wild. Ferality thus functions as a means by which human ethics are brought to bear on nonhuman nature, and predation is thereby framed as an unnecessary, “unnatural,” and even evil act.

Keywords

cats – feral – biopower – predation – predator problem

Forget Schrödinger; the most fundamentally unknowable feline is the outdoor cat. (I use the term “outdoor cat” to refer specifically to a cat who lives in a human household as a companion animal, but who also has the opportunity to be outdoors in an unsupervised manner for extended periods of time.) While we might fool ourselves that we can read the tell-tale signs—a panicked look, an old injury, a reluctance to engage in human contact—when an outdoor cat darts across your path, for all intents and purposes, you cannot discern the

feline's "ferality" in any ultimately convincing way.¹ Each and every "domestic cat" (*Felis catus*) one encounters outdoors contains the potential to be not so domestic after all: a covertly feral animal who lurks outside the parameters, and more importantly the control, of human society.

Moreover, although the term might connote some ambiguous sense of "scientificity," in practice, no insight into genetic structure or even behavioral patterns could ever discern an outdoor cat's ferality with any final certainty (Franklin, 2014). Despite attempts to pin down the meaning of feral in particular jurisdictions, the precise definition of the term remains surprisingly vague in practice. Such uncertainty arises because the designation of feral is neither objective nor stable; rather, it is deeply discursive, which is to say, following the work of Michel Foucault, that it is the product of cultural, social, and political forces (Hillier, 2017a, 2017b). Consequently, although ferality is often evoked as if its meaning were beyond doubt, in practice the idea of the feral is deeply implicated in complex and shifting systems of judgment and power. Every outdoor cat carries with them the possibility of potential ferality: the threat that they could—or, indeed, may already have—escape the bounds of human control. Every cat is a feral cat in waiting.

The indeterminate nature of ferality speaks to the manner in which outdoor cats exist across different orders of being and behavior, not least between the human and nonhuman worlds. The cat's ability to move becomes controversial, however, when figured in terms of predation. It is by virtue of this mobility that cats frequently appear in conservationist rhetoric as threats to local ecosystems that need to be managed or eliminated. The idea of the feral is therefore more than simply a technical or theoretical designation, but instead has major consequences for the life and death of cats and their prey. Understanding the ostensible danger posed by the outdoor cat to existing ecosystems requires us to untangle the multiple ways in which cats exist at the muddled intersection of conservation, domesticity, wildness, and ecological science.

In this article, I explore feral potentiality as one way to make sense of the social, environmental, and ecological statuses of outdoor cats and their existence across different regimes of power and ethics. Building on prior work that conceptualizes ferality as an expression of Foucauldian biopower, I explore how that designation is complicated by the ability of outdoor cats to move across ecological regimes of biopolitics and the strict regimes of discipline

1 Indeed, if you were to meet my cat, a tiny, long-haired mongrel with "smoke" coloring called Artemis, you could quite likely mistake her for feral, so scared is she of most human contact. I can assure you though that while she may not hang around to let you see, let alone touch, her, she is very happy to nestle on my lap in the evenings.

customarily applied to domesticated nonhumans. I argue that this movement creates conditions wherein cat predation can be figured as non-natural behavior, and thereby confound what environmental philosophers call the “predation problem”: the ethical distinction between human hunting and nonhuman predation. Consequently, I posit that it is by virtue of their feral potentiality that cats’ hunting behavior can be figured as an (un)ethical act for which they can then be held accountable in ways from which nonhuman predators are usually exempt. In this manner, and in contrast with dominant beliefs about nonhuman animal subjectivity and ethical culpability, the predatory behavior of cats can be figured by its opponents as outside of natural ecological relations and thus an unnecessary and “unnatural” act.

Defining Ferality

In contrast to many other ostensibly domesticated species, cats have historically not been subject to extensive control or confinement. Cats live among humans, but are not bound by them nor to them (Bradshaw, 2013; Tucker, 2016). It is the trite cliché of innumerable internet jokes, that while you may live with a cat, you do not own—let alone command—them. As a consequence, cats frequently exhibit a tendency to move freely between the household and the outdoors and the different regimes of animal behaviour expected in these different spaces. In the case of cats, the idea of ferality thus gestures towards this possibility of movement as much as any solid identity. Covering a wide range of possible ways of living, the category of feral can encompass both those cats who survive through scavenging and symbiosis in urban environments and those who have established lives entirely outside of human influence, and indeed, many positions in between.

Moreover, the flexibility of ferality is not limited to cats alone: rather it refers to a whole larger category of nonhuman (and sometimes human) life that is “interstitial, conceived as in-between the wild and domestic [...] animals who are conceptually on the move, travelling between and never completely or comfortably fitting into categories” (Marvin & McHugh, 2014, p. 7). The term also very frequently carries with it a pejorative sense where “feral animals are those whose wildness carries a taint of degradation” (Armstrong & Potts, 2014, p. 174). Thus, in contrast to the pure, unsullied wild, the feral has come to evoke a debased form of nature: corrupted by its time spent under human control, feral is the evil twin of wild. Whereas the wild stands majestically on a cliff top overlooking a river, the feral bites you in a back alley while you’re putting out the trash.

As a consequence of this connotative baggage, ferality fits awkwardly into scientific and legal discourses around animals such as cats. Not only can cats “move readily between different classifications that exist in the literature” across their lifetime, but the scientific literature itself is often unclear as to what exactly “feral” refers, with the term being used interchangeably with other terms like “free-roaming” or “stray” (Farnworth, Dye, & Keown, 2010). When considering the ecological status and role of cats, feral cats can be grouped together with strays and free-roaming domestic cats under categories such as “wandering” (Toukhsati, Young, Bennett, & Coleman, 2012) or “semi-owned” (Toukhsati, Bennett, & Coleman, 2007), or in other contexts, stray and feral may be treated as the same thing (Lloyd & Hernandez, 2015). As a result, “not all cats fall neatly into [the] two categories [of domestic and feral]” (Travaglia & Miller, 2018, p. 154): a situation that is further complicated by the possibility that (in some accounts at least) any given cat can move between those categories of domestic and feral throughout their lifetime (Holmberg, 2014).

Thus, despite attempts to lock down clear definitions, “the cat population is, in reality, a single fluid contiguous group where individuals may transition from one group to another, dependent on their location and the human population that it lives within or beside” (Kikillius, Chambers, Farnworth, & Hare, 2016, p. 6). A similar problem can be found in legislative and policy documents, which tend to focus on questions of ownership and where feral cats sit uneasily between the better defined categories of wild and domestic, such that it is unclear where responsibility for the animals’ wellbeing or behaviors might lie (Fry, 2010; Nurse & Ryland, 2013). The distinction between feral, stray, and wild cats is therefore inconsistent between jurisdictions and relies upon the intuitive judgement of those enacting animal control laws, rather than any clear definition (Schaffner, 2011, p. 119, pp. 129–30). Though both scientific and legal discourses are often imagined as sites of clarity and objectivity, the complication of ferality demonstrates how such qualities do not and indeed cannot exist in practice.

The difficulty of applying the concept of ferality in any consistent or cogent way does not, however, prevent the term from exerting real and consequential influence upon the world. A term need not be ontologically true to be politically powerful and when actual cats are labelled as feral, they become available to multiple forms of human intervention, management, and even extermination. Thus, although the idea of ferality says nothing about the essential or material truth of the animal it describes, it nonetheless has real implications for how animals live their lives (or die their deaths) (Hillier & Byrne, 2016, p. 388). In this sense, ferality can be thought of as discursive in the sense theorized by Foucault (2000): an enjoyment of power and knowledge “characterized by the

demarcation of a field of objects, by the definition of a legitimate perspective for a subject of knowledge, by the setting of norms for elaborating concepts and theories" (p. 11).

Discourses produce certain ways of speaking and particular points of reference for organizing and enacting knowledge that then shape how power comes to bear on both individual subjects and wider populations (Foucault, 1978). The question regarding discursive knowledge is not whether it is true or false, but how it organizes lives and produces certain ways of living. Understood as a discursive practice in this sense, ferality is more than just a way of talking about animals, it is also a way of regulating and governing them through the generation of knowledge that produces particular relationships and conceivable courses of actions. Ferality creates a way of knowing animals that then shapes how we act towards them: it calls into being a category of cats on the basis of one aspect of their existence—their relative autonomy with regard to human control—that then functions as pejoratively definitive of their entire being.

In this manner, ferality parallels Foucault's argument regarding the formation of the discourse of homosexuality in the nineteenth century. Prior to the crystallization of the homosexual identity, Foucault argues that sodomy existed as a "category of forbidden acts." Sodomy did not constitute an identity, but was rather a somewhat illicit practice in which some subjects periodically engaged (like jay-walking or binge drinking today). It was only with the establishment of the "psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality," that the homosexual subject became knowable as "a type of life, a life form, and a morphology" (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). What had previously been a particular form of behavior (Foucault, 1985, pp. 187-203) thus became the basis for a novel form of subjectivity, one thought to be fundamentally constituted by its sexuality.

Similarly, feral (though less absolutely and obsessively the subject of medical and legal discourse as homosexuality) marks an analogous process of transformation from passing behavior to fundamental identity. At earlier moments of human history, defying anthropocentric control and forging a life alongside but not determined by human society would have been seen as a common, recurring, even expected if not encouraged, animal behavior. For an animal to live in such a way—certainly no longer wild, but by no means domesticated—would have been an unsurprising form of co-existence up until as recently as the early nineteenth century (Nash, 1982, p. 57; Sterba, 2012, p. 38). The discourse of ferality names a break in this tradition, though, marking a point at which this is no longer simply a form of conduct, but rather comes to name a particular form of animal life that emerges with the birth of the modern world

(Franklin, 2014, p. 141): a form of life that, like the homosexual, is initially considered to be inherently malignant. Echoing Foucault's (1978) formulation that "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (p. 43), the aberration of the self-liberated animal now forms the basis of the new feral "species."

Regulating Nature, Disciplining Nonhuman Animals

It is paradoxical, then, that while "feral" is assumed to name a state of animal existence outside of human control, in practice, to identify a cat in those terms is to integrate them into a set of powerful systems of human governance. Once named as feral, a cat (or population of cats) becomes known in a particular way and thereby becomes available to particular forms of power. Specifically, to be labelled "feral" opens a cat up to a particular form of regulatory power that is akin to what Foucault (2003) refers to as "biopolitics" (Hillier, 2017a, 2017b; Hillier & Byrne, 2016): a specific discursive configuration that comes into being in European society at the end of the eighteenth century and which seeks to regulate human behavior as a "species" (p. 242).

Biopolitics is a form of governance and regulation that is not concerned with individuals, but instead operates at the level of populations: it addresses the "global mass" in terms of fertility, mortality and "relations between the human race ... and their environment, the milieu in which they live" (Foucault, 2003, p. 245). Biopolitics takes the form of interventions that range from epidemiology to mass hygiene, welfare systems to population forecasts, that seek to regulate behavior at the level of "biosociological processes" (Foucault, 2003, p. 250). Operating from the vantage point of bird's-eye models of social systems and flows, biopolitics is thus concerned with the control of life not at the level of individuals, but at the level of structural interventions and consequences in order to (almost always) promote population health.

Although Foucault is solely concerned with human society in his analysis, it has been widely noted that the concept of biopolitics (sometimes erroneously equated with the associated but distinct term, "biopower") is also applicable in the context of the nonhuman world as a way of describing conservation practices and ecology more generally (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014; Srinivasan, 2017; Youatt, 2008). Conservation biology is a biopolitical discourse insofar as it is intended to not only gain knowledge of the patterns and structures of life, but also to intercede within those patterns and structures to obtain specific arrangements of the nonhuman world. Conservation biology is an attempt to apply ecological knowledge as a means to regulate nonhuman life at the level of

populations. However, if the rawest and most lethal forms of biopolitics—such as eugenics and genocide—have been largely abandoned in the governance of humans (though important exceptions exist, Mbembe, 2003), they remain acceptable forms of conduct in many forms of conservation biology. Certain forms of life are regularly deemed either degraded and degrading (Holm, 2012) or even antithetical to proper nature (Holm, 2015), and are therefore subject to extreme sanctions.

In the context of human society, Foucault (2003) provocatively refers to the drawing of lethal distinctions—those that designate who should live and who should die—as “racism:” a designation within a biopolitical order that recalls the “old sovereign right to kill” in a system that is more generally dedicated to the promotion of life (p. 256). In an ecological context, ferality serves an analogously racist purpose: justifying extermination in the context of a larger discourse that is ostensibly dedicated to the flourishing of nonhuman life (Hillier, 2015). Ferality can therefore be understood as a possible position within the matrix of ecological biopolitics—and a central term of feline biopolitics in particular (Hillier, 2015, 2017a; Hillier & Byrne, 2016)—that names a population specifically open to intrusive interventions designed to reduce numbers by punitive and even lethal means. Consequently, insofar as cats are always potentially feral, they are always potentially available for lethal management.

However, the situation of the potentially feral outdoor cat is not simply a product of the biopolitical context: both the cat’s dilemma and the feline’s unusual conservation status arise because the creature straddles a boundary between wild nature and domesticity. In contrast to “natural” environments, cats encounter a markedly different set of regulatory practices within the home. Biopolitics very rarely intrude into the world of “companion animals” who are primarily understood as anthropo-adjacent subjects rather than members of nonhuman ecological systems. As a companion animal, a cat is understood and engaged with as an individual, rather than as a member of a species (Franklin, 2014, p. 149). This is not simply conceptual: companion animals in the western world are customarily de-sexed, which literally removes their ability to further contribute to the species on a biological level.

This anatomical intervention is then complemented by a range of other regimes—feeding schedules, systems of communication, micro-chipping and surveillance, physiological interventions like worming and flea treatment, and the expectation not to scratch or shed or defecate inside—that function to direct companion animals away from forms of behavior often exhibited in nonhuman environments while also making them dependent upon humans for shelter, companionship, and food. Such forms of regulation are not technically biopolitical, but rather are better understood as part of the broader

Foucauldian notion of “biopower,” which comprises both biopolitics and a set of practices alternately referred to as “anatomy-politics” or “discipline” (Foucault, 2003, pp. 242-243). In contrast to the population-level concerns of biopolitics, anatomy-politics function at the level of individual bodies, which are trained to behave in certain ways that align with the demands of their context in order to integrate individual animals into desirable systems of behavior and interaction.

In Foucault’s (1978) account, both forms of regulatory power—biopolitics and anatomy-politics—work in tandem to affect the regulation of human life in biological terms: exerting power at the level of individual and species existence (p. 139). However, while Foucault theorized these two forms of power as being tightly interwoven in his account of human society, the separation of the two makes sense in discussions of nonhuman life, where the dominant conception of nature presumes that regulatory power is not exerted upon the bodies of individual animals. To do so would be to subject them to human control and thereby remove them from the domain of what is usually regarded as wild and thereby “legitimate” nature. (The paradoxical consequences of this edict are at the heart of debates regarding the ethical and ecological statuses of the modern zoo system where the “wildness” of animals is produced through intense managerial interventions; Chrulew, 2011).

Hence, although often the focus of intervention at the levels of species or ecosystem, individual instances of nonhuman life must remain outside human control if they are to remain viably “natural.” There thus arises a situation where different forms of power are exercised upon animals (and some plants) depending upon which regime they are seen as being part of. “Wild” nonhumans are monitored and controlled at the level of species populations with little regard for the status of individuals; in contrast, domesticated nonhumans are regulated as individuals while being functionally divorced from the wider populations with which they are biologically aligned. This is not to say that such systems of power absolutely define the lived experience of these animal subjects. While they are certainly subject to power, they need not be entirely produced and defined by it, nor do such discursive accounts exhaust potential knowledge of those subjects.

In the case of nonhuman regulation, there thus are two separate regimes of power that operate in markedly different contexts where there is little potential for overlap or transition (outside of the totally administered life-systems of livestock and zoo populations). The exception, however, is cats: in particular, those who have the freedom to move between domestic and “natural” spaces. Although they are highly popular companion animals across the world, cats can often prove difficult to manage and discipline. While you might be able to

accustom puss to a particular feeding schedule and, by and large, prevent them from shredding the furniture, they always retain something a little bit wild about them: where “wild” names that desirable other realm that lies outside the perverting influence of human agency (Armstrong & Potts, 2014, p. 173).

The fact that “cats cannot be considered completely domesticated” is part of the appeal of cat companionship in many instances (Bradshaw, 2013, p. 70), and while cats’ behavior is certainly shaped by human training and discipline, it is never entirely determined by it. Indeed, the possibility that a cat might “slip back into, or demonstrate flashes of, wildness” (Birke, 2014, p. 48)—temporarily disentangling from human culture and society—is crucial to characterization of cats as potentially feral: as capable of momentarily throwing off the restrictions of human expectation and discipline.² This capacity for moving beyond the human world is particularly evident for those cats who have the opportunity to move freely in and out of the home. When a cat leaves the domestic space, they enter both materially and metaphorically into the wild spaces of nature and thereby into ecology, and the space of biopolitics.

In the home, a cat is primarily (though not entirely) an individual subject to specific and relatively simple and instrumental forms of discipline. However, once outside, they enter into a complex biopolitical space where their name-tag or feeding time doesn’t really matter: an environment where, although they might not be capable of reproducing, their ability to kill renders them a part of a biopolitical system of population-level regulation. The cat-door thus operates as a portal between different realms of biopower: a means by which cats can move between and thus confound two utterly distinct regimes of nonhuman biopower. Consequently, cats belong entirely to neither the realm of individual regulation nor ecological population management.

Red in Tooth and Claw?

The feral blurring of boundaries between the home and the wild creates a number of questions regarding animals like cats: not least, how we ought to understand and regulate interactions between cats and the broader ecosystem. At the heart of concerns regarding outdoor cats is their (often realized) potential

2 The relative freedom of cats can be productively contrasted with the situation of the other major domesticated species: dogs. The domestication of dogs is such that they are much more thoroughly constrained by (or entangled within, if you prefer) the expectations and restrictions of human society than cats. The domestication of dogs has radically altered both their appearance and behavior, and thereby made them reliant on human society in a way that does not apply in the case of cats (Bradshaw, 2013, p. xx).

to kill and to thereby intervene within wider ecological dynamics. Their feral potentiality means that cats have the ability to escape the strict control of human society—to “go feral,” as it were, however briefly—while still remaining tightly implicated within human relations.

Moreover, even more than other feral animals, cats do not simply occupy a liminal zone between the home and the wild, but can actually move back and forth between different spaces of domestic and ecological regulation. Feral potentiality is thus a quality whereby cats can impact wildlife populations while themselves not being entirely of the wild. This potential for movement sets cats apart from other predatory species, whose hunting behavior is more commonly understood as a necessary and correct part of ecological relations. As a result of their existence across human and nonhuman worlds, cats thereby confound what environmental ethics refers to as the “predator” or “predation problem,” which arises out of attempts to think through the ethical status of nonhuman predation. Addressing the predator problem can help elucidate the peculiar status of feral cats, and, in particular, the ways we might conceive of their predatory behaviors.

At its core, the predation problem is predicated on an apparent conflict between the belief that “people should treat animals as decently as possible” and the “basic presumption against human noninterference with nature” (Cowen, 2003, p. 170). What emerges out of this argument is that if humans have an ethical obligation to not harm animals, then a coherent ethical framework suggests that humans should also have some obligation to prevent animals from harming one another and to therefore prevent acts of predation. (The two precepts that inform the predator problem also evoke the distinction between animal rights ethics, which focus on the flourishing of individual animals, and environmental ethics, which is concerned with the well-being of broader ecosystems. The former are concerned with the suffering of prey animals as a form of injustice, whereas the latter understand that suffering as a legitimate and innate aspect of the nonhuman world [Callicott, 1980, pp. 336-338].)

The predator problem thus posits the necessity of policing nature, and predation in particular, in order to establish a more ethically just nonhuman world. First presented as a “reduction ad absurdum” argument by David Ritchie (Keulartz, 2016, p. 814), the predator problem has subsequently been taken up at length as a legitimate subject of ethical debate. While many ethical theorists have since sought to justify the intuition that it is best to leave the nonhuman world alone (Milburn, 2015, p. 274), others have notably sought to defend the more radical implications of Ritchie’s argument. Nussbaum (2006) (in)famously argues for an ethical obligation for humans to regulate the nonhuman world

in order to achieve “the gradual supplanting of the natural by the just” (p. 400). Such a solution resolves the predator problem by extending the anatomopolitics of the domestic sphere to the entire nonhuman world: subjecting predator species to absolute individual discipline (Keulartz, 2016, p. 818). In such an arrangement, the whole world becomes a zoo—characterized by the total management of nonhuman life and the biopolitical eradication of predation (Chrulew, 2011)—and we become the zoo-keepers (honor-bound to keep the tigers out of the penguin exhibit).

The predator problem justifies such intervention by introducing the possibility that nonhuman predation should be understood as an immoral or evil aspect of an otherwise benign nature and that humans should therefore seek to limit it (Kowalsky, 2017, p. 493). Such a perspective runs counter to dominant beliefs in mainstream ecology and ecological ethics, where such judgements make little sense, either because actions and behaviors that appear undesirable at an individual level are necessary from the perspective of the biological system (and therefore ultimately good) (Kowalsky, 2017, p. 493) or because questions of morality are simply thought not to apply to the nonhuman world according to ecological orthodoxy (Cowen, 2003, p. 170).

In light of the “predator problem,” morality thus becomes a question of scale: those who accept predation as a necessary part of the nonhuman world operate at the level of “ecosystems,” whereas those who highlight predation as a form of harm are concerned more with the ethical status of prey animals as “individuals” (Kowalsky, 2017, p. 498). What seems indefensible at an individual level becomes benign at the level of the system (or vice versa). Debates over the predator problem thus open up the possibility that predatory behaviors are not simply natural business as usual, but instead ought to be properly considered as evil, and predator species as “vicious criminals, merciless executioners and great monsters” (Keulartz, 2016, p. 824).

Die Predator, Die!

Accusations of criminality, perversity, and evil are indeed the sort of language that often creeps into debates regarding the hunting behaviors of outdoor cats (Marra & Santella, 2016; Schaffner, 2018). This is especially true in Australasia, where, even in the absence of scientific evidence regarding substantial feline impacts on local wildlife, there are calls for cats to be increasingly tightly regulated, or even exterminated, in order to allow wildlife to flourish (Franklin, 2014; Hillier, 2015, 2017a; Hillier & Byrne, 2016). In such contexts, it is legible (if not always uncontroversial) to refer to cats as “cunning killers” (Aguirre, 2019)

or “lethal mass murderers” (Guthrie, 2017) in ways that would appear unwarranted in relation to other species such as hawks or sharks whose predation is not normally framed as a form of animal-on-animal crime. Thus, although for some, Nussbaum’s argument in favor of the full regulation of nonhuman life might seem outlandish or absurd, in the context of cats such positions are openly entertained and debated in public contexts.

This is indicative of the odd status of cats with regard to the predator problem, where they seem to motivate an exception or local distortion of widespread intuitions regarding ethical obligations towards the nonhuman world. Unlike other predators, cats’ hunting behavior raises questions of moral culpability for those who would not otherwise understand predation in such terms. Even for those for whom the application of ethical categories of good or evil to the nonhuman world would seem otherwise absolutely untenable, the call to regulate (and even punish) cat behavior in the interests of a more desirable nonhuman world can appear intelligible and potentially desirable. To some extent, the feline exception can also be understood as a consequence of the cat’s common status as an “invasive” or “introduced” species. However, this is not the whole story, because in contrast to other introduced species, the cat’s predation still takes on a notably ethical valence insofar as they are described as murderers and killers. Comparably, possums in New Zealand are not addressed as ethical beings so much as sub-natural deviants; I elsewhere refer to them as “anti-animals” who are neither the subject nor bearer of ethical rights (Holm, 2015). Possums are monsters to be destroyed, cats are villains to be punished.

The key to making sense of this feline exception is what I have been referring to as their feral potentiality: the state of existing on both sides of the line that divides domestic discipline from wild biopolitics. As discussed earlier, such a distinction is not always particularly stable in practice and this is especially true in the context of cats. Only indoor cats could potentially be thought of as entirely domestic. Securely and absolutely tied to the home and the discipline that comes with it, indoor cats are removed from nature in ways that parallel Nussbaum’s solution of absolute animal discipline.³ (Even then, however, there is the distinct possibility that such animals may not be domestic in any meaningful sense: instead, they may simply be securely contained semi-wild animals or even entirely wild but sociable beings.)

In contrast, outdoor cats retain the ability to not only slip off the immediate constraints (if not the ethical responsibilities) of human society, but then also

3 The consequences of this absolute discipline for the individual animal can be somewhat counterproductive: I’ve known several indoor cats in my time and—with apologies to Larry, Bally, Titus, Milo, and Bella—they were all somewhat, well, unhinged.

to return again afterward. However, this does not mean that they are liminal creatures who only exist in a grey zone between the two spaces. In contrast to models that assert ferality as an in-between space, I argue that it makes more sense to understand feral cats, at least, as alternating between the two possible positions of domestic and wild, or even existing in both simultaneously. This means that cats thus exist on two different ecological scales. Like wild animals they hunt and kill, but unlike other predators in the nonhuman world, they also are subject to those exact forms of discipline and regulation that act to constitute them as individual subjects.

As a consequence, we become accustomed to thinking of cats as individuals, that is to say, existing on the same scale and possessing the same capabilities that, in the context of the predator problem, motivate the application of an ethical framework. Cats therefore have the unfortunate distinction of being the most visible example of an animal who continues to participate in the natural world while at the same time being partially inducted into human society. Cats engage in predatory behavior while also being theoretically subject to the disciplinary expectations of human society.

Just as cats move across different regimes of biopower, a consideration of the predator problem can thus illuminate how they also move between different ethical scales. What this means is that the movement of the cat between domestic and wild spaces is more than just a passage between different regimes of regulation; it is also a transition between different regimes of ethical expectation and responsibility. Their partial, passing existence within the disciplinary regimes of domestic space opens cats up to not only different sorts of regulation, but also different expectations regarding acceptable behavior: expectations that are completely out of line with the fact that they remain, in the end, cats. That is to say, cats are animals who when left to their own devices, will hunt and kill. Insufficiently disciplined by the regulative force of domestic anatomo-politics to rob them of their instincts, outdoor cats nonetheless are expected to adhere to the rules of human society and not intervene in the biopolitical population regulation of the nonhuman world. They are too wild to be disciplined, but not domesticated enough to be controlled. The problem with outdoor cats, therefore, is not that they kill other wild animals, but that they do so while not being sufficiently wild themselves.

Moreover, the fact that such distinctions come to carry ethical as well as regulatory meanings means that when cats move between the space of the home and the wild, they are also moving between the scale of individual ethical responsibility and the assumed immorality of the nonhuman world. In this way, feral predation goes from being a practical problem of nonhuman

management to a potentially immoral act. The predator problem is indicative of how we lack the conceptual map to make sense of the ethical status of animals beyond the binary of domesticated and wild. As a consequence, even for the majority of the Western population who are willing to accept predation as an otherwise unquestionable aspect of the nonhuman world, the feral cat's predation can be denounced as an immoral, even evil, act.

To return to the reference to Schrodinger's cat that opened this essay, outdoor cats may have more in common with the quantum-entangled kitty than I first suggested. (Moreover, like the predator problem, Schrodinger proposed his through experiment of the cat in the box as a reduction ad absurdum argument that he thought demonstrated a fundamental problem with the indeterminacy principle in quantum theory, rather than an actual situation.) Whereas Schrodinger's cat's life depends on the resolution of quantum indeterminacy—whether a specific atom has been subject to atomic decay or not—the lives of feral cats are likewise determined by their indeterminate status with regard to the predator problem. Are they domestic cats and therefore subject to the individuating discipline and responsibilities, but also the protections conferred by subjectivity? Or are they wild animals who escape human control and intervene in the lethal relations that characterize nonhuman ecological systems?

Ferality is the ecological and ethical equivalent of wave-particle duality, by which a cat can exist simultaneously as both a wild and domestic animal. Almost unique in the animal kingdom, outdoor cats have both feeding schedules and the ability to (regularly) enter into wider ecological systems. Moreover, as with Schrodinger's cat, this indeterminacy is not simply a thought experiment, but a matter of life and death. As a result of their feral potentiality, the natural hunting behavior of cats can be reconstituted as unnatural, thereby injecting ethical relations into ecosystems and making them individually culpable unlike other predators. At the same time, they are also of the wild, and therefore exposed to the lethal practices of population management that characterize nonhuman biopolitical regulation, and which are not normally applied to companion animals (or for that matter to most wild animals: unlike other predators, cats are not normally afforded any legitimate hunting range). As a result, the potentially feral cat is assigned enough individual subjectivity to be regarded as morally culpable for the act of predation, but that is at the same time insufficient for them to be excluded from the lethal mandates of ecological biopolitics. Ferality thus functions as the discursive mechanism by which ecological management is brought to bear on the quasi-human realm, and by which any nonhuman (or even human) animal might be made to answer to the deadly dictates of conservationism.

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