

ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE: KEEPING CAGED BIRDS

Author : GLEN COUSQUER

Categories : [Vets](#)

Date : March 21, 2011

GLEN COUSQUER, discusses the issues surrounding caged birds and their freedom, using theoretical aspects of ethics in the second of a two-part feature

IN part one, the history and practice of keeping songbirds in cages was discussed (issue VT41.03). In this feature I will attempt to present and discuss some of the ethical considerations of such practices.

Why are birds kept in cages and is it right to do so? In attempting to answer these questions, it is important we determine the reasons for doing so and the alternatives. We must consider which aspects of human behaviour are private and which should be controlled and legislated for by society. How are these issues viewed in different societies and how does this affect the development of laws both nationally and internationally?

Before entertaining an ethical discussion, it is necessary to look at ethical theory.

Ethical theory

Ethics has been defined as a “philosophical structure, which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning”. Or, to put it simply, ethics seeks to answer the question “what should I do, all things considered?” (Williams, 1993).

The question “what should I do?” only presents the questioner with three possible answers: to seek ends, to seek means or to seek authenticity (Fennell and Malloy, 2007). In seeking moral ends, the decision maker reviews possible alternatives and selects that with the greatest potential

for goodness. In seeking moral means, the decision maker looks to duty for guidance and places outcome secondary. In seeking authenticity, the decision maker tries to determine the course of action that resonates most truly with his or her own principles. Where such theories are consulted, they often “yield different and opposing results” (Fennell and Malloy, 2007). It is for this reason that pluralist strategies are often looked to for answers.

It might be interesting, and indeed useful, to consider the last time you faced a moral dilemma and consciously made an ethical decision. To what extent did you adopt a consequentialist approach, consider all the options, comparing the benefits of each one, and choosing that which you adjudged likely to produce the most good? You may, on the other hand, have preferred to examine your motives and chosen to act as virtuously as possible. Alternatively, you may not have considered these angles at all and gone along with what you felt was right for you.

Confused? Maybe it's because you haven't given much thought to your ethical decision-making process. Much of it is undertaken at a subconscious level, arising as a combined result of our upbringing, reasoning and some mental reflection. This allows us to envisage the individual act as an ethical iceberg, the bulk of which is hidden from view (not usually thought about or discussed) (Mepham, 2005).

The following overview of two of these approaches will allow the issues underlying the keeping of songbirds in cages to be discussed.

Utilitarianism is the most prominent consequentialist theory. The utilitarian approach weighs up the consequences of different courses of action and a decision is made in order to produce the “greatest good for the greatest number” (Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832). One of the problems is that benefit is so hard to define. Utilitarianism has been widely used within animal rights debates and to justify aspects of science and technology where risks are involved.

Those who employ it as a form of ethical reasoning need to be aware of its theoretical limitations (Mepham, 2005). One concerns the scope of any cost or risk analysis. Who or what should be included? Are the consequences limited to one's social group, community, and country or to humanity generally? Should one go beyond humanity and consider the ecosystem of which man is part?

The evolution of modern society has produced a wider horizon for human consciousness as we have become conscious of our involvement in humanity on a global basis (Durkheim, 1957).

When seeking means, we can choose to adopt a deontological or a teleological approach. The former draws on the ideas of Immanuel Kant who tried to establish principles that would apply regardless of other people's desires or social relations.

Kantian ethics respects the inherent dignity of other people and treats them as ends in themselves,

considers morality to be founded on categorical imperatives and requires us to respect the universal rights of others. Where Kant (1785) regarded animals as man's instruments and concluded that we had no direct obligations to them, philosophers such as Tom Regan have disputed this and have argued that animals have ethical standing because they are "subjects of a life" (Regan, 1985). By contrast, virtue ethics as an example of a teleological approach to moral dilemmas emphasises virtue and character, wise decision-making and good citizenship (MacIntyre, 1985). According to Hursthouse (2000), virtue theory requires the virtuous person to exercise the virtues of kindness and compassion, leading us to respect the lives of sentient animals.

Despite their limitations, virtue theory, deontology (Kantianism) and utilitarianism can provide us with a framework for addressing modern day moral dilemmas. Ethical analysis and decisionmaking can draw on and combine elements of the different theories, thus adopting a pluralist strategy that recognises relevant *prima facie* principles and the interests of the various agents involved (Mepham, 2005).

Cage birds

The word cage carries a negative connotation – that of captivity, loss of freedom and an abuse of power. Why is it then that songbirds are caught and imprisoned in tiny cages in some parts of the world? Why is it that, in other parts of the world, such abuse has been legislated against?

Part of the answer may lie in the emergence of the west from a period of intense industrialisation and urbanisation, during which large numbers of people moved from the countryside to the towns. Many of these people felt a need to have the familiar music of songbirds around them. The resulting decimation of wild populations, and the accompanying outcry, led to the practice of catching songbirds being questioned and eventually banned.

Societal values could be said to have evolved in Britain, as people became aware of the impact the wild bird trade had on wild populations and recognised the value of our natural heritage and the need to protect it.

If this is true, it is possible we are seeing a product of ethical relativism with the rights and wrongs of capturing wild birds determined by the cultural and social environment of the day. It is likely this process is occurring in Mediterranean countries where the capture and caging of wild songbirds is common. In many of these countries, wildlife is seen as a resource to be exploited. Birds are trapped and sold because demand outweighs any reasons not to.

Around the world, but especially in the US, there has long been a conflict between the spiritual and material utility of natural resources (Nash, 1973). Both John Muir (1901) and Aldo Leopold (1966) stressed the philosophical value of wildlife and, in doing so, they championed its intrinsic value. Leopold's eco-centric perspective recommends a relationship between ends and means, not ends and means, thus infusing wildlife with love, respect, admiration and high regard.

Certain societies have used legislation to protect wild bird populations from human exploitation. This reflects the inherent value of wildlife and the recognition that we cannot go on exploiting wild bird populations. From a utilitarian point of view, this required us to set aside the right of people to earn a living from the capture and sale of wild birds as well as the right to have caged wild songbirds in their home and workplace.

From a virtue ethics viewpoint, it required us to decide on a just, kind, compassionate and responsible course of action. The large number of birds dying needlessly within the wild bird trade, together with the decimation of wild populations, would have highlighted the cruel, unsustainable aspects of this trade. Shifts in popular opinion, together with changes in legislation, allowed certain western countries, including the UK, to progressively eliminate the trade in wild songbirds.

Alternatives

Attempts to reproduce this phenomenon in other countries, particularly those in the Mediterranean basin, are meeting with some resistance. With the ready availability of sound recordings, it will be interesting to see if recordings of bird song will be able to meet the need to have the air filled with the sound of goldfinches and other songbirds.

The promotion of urban green spaces, wildlife gardens and the creation of feeding stations to attract wild birds may also play a role in changing behaviour.

The trade in captive-bred cage birds has also been promoted as an alternative to the trade in wild-caught birds. It has reduced the pressure on wild bird populations, while meeting the public's demand for "pet birds". This growing industry has created jobs for breeders, pet shops, and feed manufacturers as well as vets.

From a utilitarian point of view, the wild bird populations benefit, jobs are created and individual members of the public still get to have a bird as a companion. Surely this is a win-win situation.

But what of the birds' needs? Birds are viewed in the English language as exotic pets. In French, the term "nouveaux animaux de compagnie" (NAC) is used. Both appear to refer to the novelty aspect of these animals, the fact they are different.

What motivates their acquisition? How many owners are purchasing these animals because of their novelty factor, as a house decoration or in order to impress? How many view the bird as a possession, as a means to liven up the household, entertain the visitors and teach the kids about caring for birds?

Contrast this with the number who view the bird as an end in itself, as something to respect and understand.

It may be appropriate to consider whether a domestic bird can be respected and admired in the same way that Leopold suggests we admire a wild bird. Many of the wild characteristics may be lost during the process of domestication. It tends to subject animals to a process of selection whereby desirable characteristics are retained and undesirable characteristics rejected. In many cases this will lead to the selection of characteristics that make an animal a good companion, such as trainability and good temperament. In other cases, the characteristics selected are to do with morphology and aesthetics such as plumage and voice.

Many of these birds will retain a large part of their wild characteristics. Their ability to fly and forage for food is only suppressed through confinement and lack of practice. Some people might argue that these birds would struggle to survive in the wild. That is debatable, for there are many examples of captive birds escaping and surviving perfectly well in the wild. So, are their needs best met in captivity or in the wild?

This is a very difficult question. How does one compare the protection available to a domestic bird with the freedom of a wild bird? It is difficult to guess the personal preferences of an animal that can fly high and free. What is it like to have this ability and the incredible freedom that accompanies it?

In the same way that we can never answer Nagel's seminal question "What is it like to be a bat?" (Nagel, 1974), we can never truly know what we are depriving a captive bird of, especially if its freedom is restricted to a cage. We can, however, use our imagination and allow our opinions about this issue to be guided by our sense of compassion and responsibility.

But these birds are domesticated you might argue. True, but what does that really mean? They are not there to produce essential commodities, such as eggs, meat or feathers. They are, it would appear, there to be admired and to entertain. They are there because someone is breeding them, cannot legally release them into the wild and must dispose of them in a responsible way. They are there because our consumerist culture has created a demand for them.

While it is difficult to know how many pet birds are sold in the UK every year, it is documented that between 2000 and 2003, the RSPCA rescued 16,249 pet birds. This is only a fraction of the birds sold and surely raises questions about the welfare of pet birds.

In Europe, the right to breed and sell these birds, together with the right of the public to purchase them, appears to be respected providing the birds' welfare does not suffer. Concerns over the ability of members of society to keep domestic animals (including birds) in captivity and adequately meet their needs has led to the development of animal welfare legislation. Unfortunately, this is still to make a significant difference to the public's ability to provide adequate levels of care for birds.

It is therefore appropriate to finish by raising questions about the way we balance individuals' rights and responsibilities. Any right to possess a pet bird must be balanced with guarantees that

the duty of care owed to this animal will be met.

There are many who would argue that birds are best admired and appreciated in their natural environment. Where they are to be traded as commodities, we need to consider the impact this may have on the way we view birds and the natural world. We should encourage prospective owners to consider their motives in wanting a pet bird and whether it is appropriate to keep birds in cages.

To what extent have they thoroughly researched their purchase and made it possible to choose a companion animal wisely? Have they considered their duties as citizens and responsible adults and how these are to be balanced against their own personal desires?

The virtuous person will resist impulse purchases and make wise choices.

Conclusion

Virtuous conduct and wise decision-making are desirable characteristics in members of society. Where bird keeping is concerned, particularly with respect to keeping cage birds, a system that promotes responsible pet ownership should be created. Consideration of the wider implications of the pet trade is needed if we are to retain the love, respect and admiration that we owe to all birds, whether they are wild or domesticated.

References

- Durkheim E (1957). *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, Routledge, London.
- Fennell D A and Malloy D C (2007). *Codes of Ethics in Tourism: Practice, Theory, Synthesis*, Channel View Publications, Clevedon, UK.
- Hursthouse R (2000). *Ethics, Humans and Other Animals*, Routledge, London.
- Kant (1785/1932). *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*, Longmans, Green and Co, London.
- Leopold A (1966). *A Sand County Almanac*, Ballantine Books, New York
- MacIntyre A (2007). *After Virtue (3rd edn)*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, US.
- Mepham B (2005). *Bioethics: An Introduction for the Biosciences*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Muir J (1901). *Our National Parks*, Houghton-Mifflin and Co, New York.
- Nagel T (1974). What is it like to be a bat?, *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, 4 (October 1974): 435-450.
- Nash R (1973). *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Yale University Press, Newhaven, Connecticut.
- Regan T (1985). The case for animal rights. In: *In Defence of Animals*, Peter Singer (ed) Blackwell, Oxford.

- Taylor P W (1986). *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Williams B (1993). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Fontana, London.

Further reading

- www.bva.co.uk/public/documents/captive_birds_import.pdf