

The Harm of Desire Modification in Non-Human Animals: Circumventing Control, Diminishing Ownership and Undermining Agency

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Abstract

It is seemingly bad for animals to have their desires modified in at least some cases, for instance where brainwashing or neurological manipulation takes place. In humans, many argue that such modification interferes with our positive liberty or undermines our autonomy but this explanation is inapplicable in the case of animals as they lack the capacity for autonomy in the relevant sense. As such, the standard view has been that, despite any intuitions to the contrary, the modification of animals' desires is not harmful (at least not in itself). In this article, I offer a different perspective on this issue, laying the foundations of a novel argument in defence of the view that animals *can* be harmed by desire modification directly. I suggest that the modification of an animal's desires (under certain circumstances) is harmful for that animal because it undermines their agency.

Keywords: Agency; Autonomy; Brainwashing; Desire Modification; Positive Liberty.

Introduction

If sentient non-human animals (henceforth merely 'animals') are agents then it is seemingly harmful to restrict their liberty through obstructing their courses of action.¹ However animals,

¹ For a defence of the claim that sentient non-human animals are agents see: (Sebo 2017; Thomas 2016; Wilcox 2020).

exempting some possible borderline cases, lack the capacity to reflect upon and endorse desires. As such, they cannot identify with their desires and so we standardly don't take desires to 'belong to them' in the same way we do with typical adult humans. So, although it is good for animals to be free to act upon the desires available to them, since the desires they act upon are not truly 'theirs', an animal's desires can be modified and/or replaced without it impacting upon their wellbeing. Because of this, it is widely accepted that there is nothing morally problematic about modifying an animal's desires in itself. In contrast to this view, it is my intuition that despite animals lacking the ability to reflect upon, revise, endorse or identify with desires, they can nonetheless be harmed by having their desires modified (in some cases). Further, I think that this harm is due to the content of the new desires that the animals will possess or the content of current desires that will be lost, but in fact is because there is something harmful about the modification of an animal's desires itself in these cases.

In this article I will outline how this intuition might be defended, providing the basis of an argument that the modification of an animal's desires under certain circumstances, undermines their agency through removing the level of control they have over the process of desire formation and diminishing the degree of ownership they have over the resulting desires and thereby harms the animal. Hence, it is *pro tanto* bad for an animal to have their desires modified in certain circumstances. Further I suggest that this is not an experiential harm, and thus an animal is made worse off through having their agency undermined even though they are unaware that they are suffering this harm.

I. Desire-Modifying States

I will dub the process or event through which one's desires are modified a 'desire-modifying state'. Such states may be chosen and actively engaged in, such as when a human seeks out new tastes, they may be forced upon one or they may be a mere accidental event. I will mainly focus on

two different desire-modifying states for animals within this paper. These two desire-modifying states are:

Direct Neurological Manipulation - Interfering directly with an individual's nervous system through physical or chemical means to bring about a new desire or aversion and/or remove a current desire or aversion.² An example of this kind of desire-modifying state is an agent drugging or performing brain surgery on a dog to modify their desire to go for a walk, so that they form a new desire to only go out for a walk once a week.

Conditioning - Controlling the stimulus which an individual experiences so that they form a new desire or aversion to the stimulus or a related experience. One example of this kind of state is an agent negatively reinforcing 'non-compliant' behaviour through administering a painful electric shock to a mother monkey whenever she nears her child, causing her to cease to desire physical contact with her child and perhaps actively desire the absence of physical contact with her child.

These are just two instances of desire-modifying states that I find to be intuitively harmful for the animals that experience them. Further, it seems to me that the harm that animals suffer through experiencing these states are related to the fact that the animals' desires have been modified in a particular way. These two states are not supposed to be an exhaustive list of desire-modifying states that are harmful for animals. Nor have these instances been chosen because they are representative of the major types of harmful desire-modifying states animals are capable of experiencing. These states have been chosen merely as a sample, to show some of the different ways in which the modification of an animal's desire might be harmful for them.

Most readers (I hope) will agree that instigating such states are wrong. Further, I think that most readers will also share my intuition that such actions are harmful for the animals involved. In both of these cases we can point to a variety of reasons for why we might think such circumstances are harmful for the animals themselves: because the new desires they are forced into adopting will make them engage in behaviour less conducive to a good standard of wellbeing; because the new

² Henceforth referred to merely as 'neurological manipulation' for brevity.

desires will lead to physical health issues and/or death; because the animals in these situations are taken from their homes and confined to a cage in a lab, etc.

Whilst these reasons are certainly important, I am primarily concerned with the harm of the desire modification itself that takes place in these cases. I am specifically interested in the harm animals suffer as a direct result of experiencing neurological manipulation and conditioning, aside from the future repercussions these desire-modifying states have on their lives. So, I am interested in whether, for instance, neurological manipulation can harm an animal, even in a case where the procedure is painlessly conducted on a wild animal whilst they slept, and their new desire(s) would not change their overall level of subjective satisfaction, now or in the future. I suspect that even in such a case, the animal involved is harmed by neurological manipulation. This is because I think that desire modifying states, such as neurological manipulation and some forms of conditioning, can be harmful to animals even where they have no impact upon an animal's subjective wellbeing, and the animal themselves would be unaware of the actions of the interfering agent.

In this paper, I will sketch out an original argument of the potential harm of desire-modification in animals using the examples of neurological manipulation and conditioning. This argument will not aim to show that such desire-modifying states are-all-things-considered harmful for animals, but merely that they are *pro tanto* harmful for the animals that live through them. As such we have a defeasible moral reason not to subject animals to these desire-modifying states. Before putting forward this argument, I will provide some context to the debate around desire modification in animals through discussing the Teleological Account: a perfectionist account of animal wellbeing that is often employed to show that the modification of animals' desires is harmful (under some circumstances).

II. The Teleological Account

The best attempt to provide an explanation of the harm of desire modification in animals comes from proponents of the *Teleological Account* or *Capabilities Account*. This account is rooted in the Aristotelian idea that beings have an intrinsic function or nature, known as a ‘*telos*’. According to defenders of the Teleological Account, a good life is one in which one is able to pursue one’s *telos*. This is normally interpreted to mean that a good life for an animal is one in which they are able to engage in those behaviours that are natural for a member of their species.³ Bernard Rollin makes the further claim that it is wrong to interfere with animals’ lives in ways which stop them pursuing their natural behaviours, even if through such interference they do not experience suffering and in the future might experience ‘a good deal’ of pleasure because of the interference. Such actions are wrong, Rollin states, because they violate an animal’s nature and dignity (Rollin 1981, 34–35).

Thus according to the Teleological Account, some desire-modifying states can be bad for animals because they can motivate them to act in ways that are not natural for members of their species and thus do not align with their *telos*. For instance, through developing an addiction to tobacco a chimp may neglect some of his ‘natural’ desires such as engaging in play with his troop or maintaining social relations. Similarly, through undergoing brain surgery a dog ceases to desire to walk or run as much to the extent that she gains weight and develops health complications. This obstruction of animals pursuing their natural desires and/or animals developing and pursuing unnatural desires, is wrong.

Not only can the Teleological Account explain what is wrong with such desire-modifying states, but it also provides an explanation of the harm of desire modification for animals in cases where the animal is not made experientially worse off through the process of desire modification. As such, the Teleological Account suggests that desire modification can be harmful in itself, even if an animal’s subjective experience is not negatively affected. This last point is perhaps the most important

³ Rollin, Taylor and Nussbaum and the most prominent defenders of the Teleological Account. Nussbaum’s account is a little more complex in that she believes that what is good for an animal is being able to pursue those actions which are natural, as well as central and good for a member of their species. However this complication need not concern us here (Nussbaum 2007, 347; Rollin 1981, 52–53; Taylor 2011, 108–9).

part of the account for my purposes. It seems intuitively correct to me that at least some cases of desire modification harm animals, even if from the animal's perspective, they appear no worse off, and even if they appear to be better off.⁴

Unfortunately, despite this virtue, I suggest that this is not a satisfactory account of the harm of desire modification in animals. It seems that the Teleological Account has two main failings in accounting for the harm of desire modification in animals. Firstly, it seems to suggest that animals are merely tokens of a type and fails to recognise that each individual animal will live their own unique, subjective life.⁵ Through utilising the notion of *telos* the Teleological Account suggests that species are distinct kinds and as such, each individual member of a given species shares the same essence or nature. In virtue of this, what an individual animal desires under normal circumstances (and thus what is good for them) can be determined merely through assessing their species membership.

This claim is highly problematic because it significantly over-simplifies the lives and minds of animals, overlooking the complex psychological process through which they form desires and other subjective experiences, and the role that these states play in determining what is good for them. Of course, the content of an animal's desires will be affected by the kind of body they have, their genetic code and the sense organs they possess and admittedly, these features are all closely tied to their species membership. However, these factors alone are not sufficient to determine all of one's desires. Just like a human's desires, an animal's desires are (at least partly) determined by a variety of facts about her as an individual, including the environment she lives in, her personal history and experiences, as well as her individual biological, physiological and psychological idiosyncrasies. So, like other agents, individual animals can have idiosyncratic (species atypical) desires which most

⁴ The view that individuals can suffer non-experiential harms has had sufficient discussion elsewhere in the literature to warrant no further discussion here. Although previous literature on this view has almost exclusively focused on its application to humans, I take it that the same arguments can be used to explain how animals can be non-experientially harmed and thus how animal wellbeing can be understood using some kind of objective list theory. However, if one is still unconvinced, I offer a defence of objectivist accounts of animal wellbeing here: (Wilcox, 2021)

⁵ Donaldson and Kymlicka recognise a similar problem with the Teleological Account (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2013, 99).

other members of their species may not.⁶ To give just one example, consider the case of the wild polar bear that regularly engages in play with a sled dog, an animal that would typically be treated as prey by a polar bear.⁷

Secondly, the Teleological Account doesn't track *the right kind of harm*. This seems to be in light of the first failing of the account: that it fails to recognise the individuality and agency of animals. It is undoubtedly wrong to modify the dog's desires through invasive brain surgery so that she has a much weaker desire to walk or run. It is easy to see that a dog that has the desire to walk or run less is, other things being equal, worse off than a dog that has a healthy desire to walk, run and play. However, there seems to be something intuitively harmful with our invasive interference with her desire itself, aside from whether the content of her newly formed desires make her overall worse (or better) off.

The Teleological Account cannot accommodate this kind of explanation. Desire modification can only ever harm an animal on the Teleological Account because of the content of the newly formed desire, specifically, because an animal forms a desire for something that members of their species 'naturally' do not desire, or because they lose a desire for something that members of their species 'naturally' desire. Thus it seems that the Teleological Account does not track the harm of desire modification *per se* but rather the harm related to possessing desires with unnatural content, regardless of how they are developed. Plausibly, if desire modification itself is harmful to animals, the account that provides an explanation for this harm should explain why the process of the modification of desires is harmful rather than explain why the possession of desires with specific content is harmful.

⁶ Even Mill notes, that '...even sheep are not indistinguishably alike' when it comes to what is good for them (Mill 1918, 83).

⁷ This case is documented widely. One such source of information is: "Can Polar Bears and Dogs Be Playmates?", BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z9y9kqt>. Many similar cases of animals exhibiting what proponents of the Teleological Account would seemingly dub 'unnatural' behaviour can be easily found: cats mothering chicks; tigers, lions and bears co-habiting an enclosure in a nature reserve and even lions forming relationships with humans such that the humans can 'play' with the lions and remain unscathed. Stories such as these make the rounds on the internet every day. ("Cat 'Nurses' Ducklings Along With Her Own Kittens", The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/29/cat-breastfeeds-nurse-duckings-kittens-video_n_3349676.html; "Lion, tiger and bear all live together at Noah's Ark Sanctuary in Georgia", Nelson's News on WSB-TV 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWviAjowmmc>; "The Lion Man", Asad Khan 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxPaUUaxGIM>).

As such, it seems to me that the Teleological Account does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the harm of desire-modification, or at least it does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the kind of harm I intuitively take desire modification to inflict on animals. Any account that attempts to explain the harm of desire modification in animals should align with our latest theories of animal minds and accommodate animals' individuality and agency. Further, if an account is to explain why desire modification is harmful in itself, this explanation should be content-neutral; providing an account of the harm inflicted through the modification process rather than the harm inflicted through the mere possession of desires with specific content.

III. What Does the Solution Look Like?

Few of us would contest the claim that humans can be harmed by desire modification through neurological manipulation or conditioning. This being the case it is useful to consider the best account of the harm of desire-modifying states for humans, in order to determine what an ideal account of the harm of desire-modifying states for animals should look like. In addition to the obvious harmful consequences that often accompany desire modification in humans, it is argued by many theorists that desire modification can be harmful for us in itself because it may undermine our autonomy. Autonomy in this context is normally interpreted in terms of one of two other concepts:

Authenticity - being able to act on those desires that are truly one's own, being able to act in line with one's deepest held values and realising one's ideal self.

Sovereignty - having self-control over one's desires, being able to reflect upon and endorse or reject desires.⁸

⁸ It is worth highlighting, for those unfamiliar with the autonomy literature, that the notions of 'authenticity' and 'sovereignty' as I define them here, may be referred to by different names elsewhere. Likewise the labels 'authenticity' and 'sovereignty' may be applied to slightly different notions of autonomy elsewhere in the literature. Arpaly offers perhaps the clearest and most comprehensive survey of the different ways in which the term 'autonomy' is used in the philosophical literature here: (Arpaly 2004, 118–22).

Thus desire-modifying states are understood to undermine one's authenticity by stopping one from acting in line with one's true desires or undermining one's sovereignty through interfering with one's control over one's desires. Whilst these notions are somewhat overlapping, different arguments have been given in support of these two ways that desire-modifying states undermine humans' autonomy.⁹

I'll consider a typical argument for each of these two understandings of the claim that desire modification can undermine one's autonomy, in turn. A common argument for the view that some desire-modifying states undermine one's authenticity runs like so: As humans we have a set of strong general desires about who we want to be and the kind of life we want to lead that define our character. We strongly identify with these core desires and we use them to evaluate our other desires. We assess whether our desires align with these core desires to determine if our desires reflect our true self. Where these desires are not recognised as aligning with these core desires we disassociate from them. Though these desires can still motivate us, and still form part of our desire set, we don't recognise them as authentically 'our desires'. These desires undermine our authenticity through motivating us to engage in courses of action that don't align with our true self. So if one was to experience desire modification through neurological manipulation or certain forms of conditioning, the desires that one would form would not be desires that one has reflected upon and chosen because they align with one's core desires. Through the process of having modified desires forced upon one, one would be denied the opportunity to reflect upon and potentially reject (or endorse) these desires. These modified desires would thus be 'inauthentic' as they do not represent one's true self. When desire modification causes this result, it can be said to undermine an agent's authenticity. What undermines our autonomy according to this argument then, is the relation that the content of the modified desire bears to one's core desires.¹⁰

⁹ I am not suggesting that these are the only relevant ways humans suffer through experiencing desire-modifying states, nor do I take these two summaries to be an exhaustive account of the ways that desire-modifying states can undermine one's autonomy in particular, however these appear to me to be the most prominent ways in which to interpret the claim that desire modification can undermine one's autonomy.

¹⁰ Dworkin and Frankfurt provide arguments of this kind (Dworkin 1988; Frankfurt 1971).

A common argument for the view that desire-modifying states can undermine one's sovereignty runs like so: Some desire-modifying states circumvent our capacity to reflect upon the formation and modification of our desires. This inhibition of our capacity to rationally scrutinise the modification of our current desires, leads to us forming desires which we would have resisted forming, if we were aware of the process through which we were forming the desire or if we were not under the influence of factors that inhibit our self-reflection. Were we able to reflect upon the process of desire modification (free from any relevant inhibited factors) we would not have modified our desires in the same way. Thus through having our reflective capacities inhibited or circumvented and then encouraging us to form or modify desires which we would not form or modify were our reflective capacities not inhibited or circumvented, these desire-modifying states undermine our sovereignty. In this argument what undermines our autonomy is the relation that the process of desire formation bears to the agent.¹¹

Both of these arguments (and the views they support more generally) are more complex than I have presented them here, however the further complexities are not relevant to my argument. What is relevant for my purposes is that it is a prevalent view in the philosophical literature that desire modification (in the ways discussed) can harm humans in itself in (at least) these two ways: through undermining our authenticity and through undermining our sovereignty. Importantly, it is a feature of the philosophical literature that both of these explanations are unanimously agreed to be inapplicable to animals because of animals' inability to reflect upon and revise their desires. I will not debate this point, I accept that animals are incapable of possessing these capacities. Nonetheless, I suspect desire modification can harm animals in a similar way.

Where autonomy is central to the explanation of the harm of desire modification in humans, I suggest that agency is central to the explanation of desire modification in animals. Further where sovereignty and authenticity are employed to express the harm of humans having their autonomy undermined, I propose that the undermining of an animal's agency can be expressed through making

¹¹ Christman provides an argument of this kind (Christman 1991).

use of the related, but broader, concepts of control and ownership. I'll explore these views in more detail in the next sections.

IV. Desire Formation and Self-Determination

I will offer an account that focuses on agency to explain the harm that an animal might suffer when they experience a desire-modifying state such as conditioning or neurological manipulation. The central claim of this view is that through experiencing one of these desire-modifying states, an animal has their agency undermined and through this, is harmed. I will suggest that the way in which animals have their agency undermined can be expressed in terms of two facets of agency: control and ownership. I'll argue that through having their control over the formation of desires circumvented, lessened or removed, and through having their ownership over the desires they form diminished, animals have their agency undermined. I'll spend this section briefly fleshing out what desire formation in animals looks like, what it means for an animal to be self-determined and how a lack of control over desire formation and ownership over desires undermine an animal's agency. Once I have done this I will sketch out an argument for how neurological manipulation and conditioning can undermine animals' agency.

I take it that animals are agents in the sense that they are able to engage in intentional action. They have desires that motivate them and they can act on these desires to make choices about how to live their lives, even if these choices are comparatively quite low-level compared to the kind of choices most humans make about their lives.¹² Further, animal's desires, just like the desires of human agents, change over time. Despite what historical views have told us, animals are not 'locked-in' to their desires. They experience desire-modifying states and form new desires independently of any interaction with humans (or other agents) all the time. Broadly speaking, I take it that an animal (free from interference from another agent) typically forms a new desire like so: sensations are experienced

¹² (Wilcox 2020)

by the animal, the animal will form some belief(s) (or some functionally equivalent doxastic states) including at least some beliefs about the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the sensations, the animal will then form a desire (or some functionally equivalent motivational state) based on the content of these beliefs.¹³ Obviously this process is not harmful to them. Changes to one's desires (and mental states more generally) are simply a natural part of life for an agent. What makes certain desire-modifying states (such as conditioning and neurological manipulation) harmful to animals is, I suggest, that the process through which desire modification occurs in these states is contrary to the process by which animals form desires themselves, when they are free from interference from other agents.

There are two features of this process which it is important to highlight for my argument. Firstly, desires are supported by beliefs. Thus, if an animal forms a new desire it will typically be in light of a change in their belief set. This may be the removal of a currently held belief(s), the addition of a new belief(s) or both. Secondly, animals' beliefs and desires are typically tied to the sensations they experience and thus the kind of desires they form will depend upon the kind of lives they lead, the environment in which they live and the opportunities that are presented to them. So, although they are unable to reflect upon their desires, an animal's choices can still have an effect upon the desires they form.

I will now outline why it is good for animals to be able to engage in this process of desire formation and sketch out two ways in which this process can be disrupted to undermine animals' agency using the concepts of control and ownership. I will then look at how neurological manipulation and conditioning specifically undermine animals' agency in just these ways in the next section.

I have previously argued that it is good for animals to be free to exercise their agency because through doing so they can determine the course of their own lives (Wilcox 2021). I think that an animal should be free to exercise their agency to live a life of their own choosing, even if through

¹³ Henceforth, for ease of writing, I will refer to 'beliefs and functionally equivalent doxastic states' as 'beliefs' and 'desires and functionally equivalent motivational states' as 'desires'.

determining the course of their own life they are experientially no better or worse off than they would have been, if they had not exercised their agency. This is because self-determination is good for agents *in itself* and directly contributes towards an animal's overall well-being.

Assuming this is correct, it is seemingly integral to living a self-determined life that an animal has control over their actions. Control is a necessary condition for self-determination and where an animal's level of control is reduced, their ability to live a self-determined life is also reduced. Through experiencing some desire modifying states animals have their control circumvented, reduced or removed. In doing so, animals have their opportunities for self-determination reduced too and as such are plausibly harmed. The harm of desire modification according to this argument results from the relation between the process of desire modification and the agent.

An alternative way to express the harm of desire modification is through the concept of ownership. Through being self-determined an animal has involvement in the direction of their own life: the animal is free to act upon their desires, rather than live a life in which their desires are satisfied for them. Thus we might say that through living a self-determined life an animal has a greater degree of 'ownership' over the direction of their life than they would have otherwise. Seemingly an animal could gain a greater degree of ownership over their life not just through playing an active role in the pursuit of their desires but also through taking an active role in the formation of their desires. Playing an active role in the formation of their desires would seemingly grant an animal a greater degree of ownership over the resulting desires and through this a greater degree of self-determination over their own life. So, if it is good for an animal to take an active role in the direction of their life it is seemingly good for an animal to take an active role in the formation of their desires and bad for them to have this opportunity suppressed.

In some desire modifying states an animal may be cut out of the process of desire formation. As a result of having less involvement in the process of desire formation there is a sense in which the resulting desire is less 'theirs' than one which they would have formed without the interference of alien agents. If this is the case then through having their desires modified under certain circumstances,

an animal is plausibly less self-determined than they would be otherwise. So through forming a desire over which they have less ownership an animal is harmed. According to this argument for diminishing ownership, the harm of desire modification results from the relation between the modified desire and the agent.

I make no substantial claim about whether these are two distinct views, or whether these are two ways to express the same view. It is my suspicion that the most accurate explanation of the harm of desire modification in animals may involve both the notions of control and ownership and that these two explanations are in fact complementary. In anycase, I discuss them separately to show the analogy between these explanations of the harm of desire modification in animals and the explanations of the harm of desire modification in humans. I also remind my reader that this is not an attempt to provide a full defence of the harm of desire modification in animals but to put some new ideas on the table so to speak by showing that some novel alternatives exhibit enough potential to warrant further investigation.

V. Undermining Agency

I will now look at how animals have their agency undermined through the desire-modifying states of neurological manipulation and conditioning specifically. Both of these processes undermine animals' agency in slightly different ways.

Direct Neurological Manipulation: By interfering with an animal's neurological system through either physical or chemical intervention to modify a desire, the majority of the typical desire forming process is circumvented. The animal does not take in the relevant sensations or form beliefs based on these sensations before forming the desire. So the animal's new desire is unsupported by the animal's pre-existing beliefs and experienced sensations. The new desire has not been formed by the animal herself, based on her other mental states and experiences. The desire has instead been directly

inserted into the animal's desire set. As such, this removes the animal's control over the desires she possesses in an obvious way. Even if the animal's mind contains the beliefs and experiences that *would* give rise to the desire, if she was to have formed the desire independently, unlike independently formed desires, the formation of this desire is not a result of the animals forming the desire *in light of* supporting beliefs which have in turn been formed because the animal has experienced supporting sensations and thus the animal still has their agency undermined.

As noted in the previous section, the everyday choices that an animal makes can indirectly affect the sensations that they experience. Whilst these sensations would of course be determined by the animal's environment, the sensory organs they possess and other factors, as agents, animals exert some control over which environments they choose to inhabit and what they do within these environments. This is not to say that animals are able to directly choose the sensations they experience, but they can (and often do) abort a chosen course of action where it results in them experiencing something unpleasant or where they expect it to result in something unpleasant or undesirable. For instance, where an animal bites into a fruit only to find it sour, they can choose to spit it out and seek out another source of food. Thus through the typical desire formation process, animals have some control over the desires they form. By removing this (already limited) control, through directly inserting desires into the animal desire set, circumventing the typical desire formation process, the animal's agency is undermined and thus they are harmed.

Alternatively we may say that the animal's agency is undermined through neurological manipulation because she has less ownership over the resulting desire. Desires formed through the typical process result from the sensations an animal has gained through living a life they have determined themselves. Desire modification through neurological manipulation minimises the role that the animal plays in the formation of her desires by cutting out the part of the process in which she is involved.¹⁴ A desire that has developed through the typical desire formation process in which the

¹⁴ To be clear, when I state 'the role that the animal plays in the formation of a desire' I mean the role she plays as an intentional agent i.e. the choices she makes around avoiding, seeking and allowing the experience of specific sensations, not the psychological processes that occur within her mind over which she has no direct agency.

animal plays an active part is plausibly more ‘hers’ than a desire resulting from neurological manipulation.

So according to this view, neurological manipulation can be harmful to an animal, regardless of the content of the desire formed through this process and its impact upon the animal’s subjective experience. Through neurological manipulation, a desire is inserted into the animal’s desire set which has been formed through a process in which the animal’s control and involvement was suppressed. Such interference undermines an animal’s agency though removing the control she has over forming desires and diminishing her ownership over the resulting desire.

Conditioning: There are many different types of conditioning, many of which may harm animals (and some of which plausibly may not). However, I will focus solely on classical conditioning, specifically where this conditioning involves forcing an agent to experience specific sensations without the opportunity to withdraw or avoid the stimulus. For instance, where an animal is confined and made to experience an unpleasant sensation in the presence of, or absence of, some object or event with the aim of forcing the animal to form a desire for, or an aversion to, an unrelated stimulus.¹⁵

Unlike neurological manipulation, such conditioning techniques do not circumvent parts of the typical process through which animals form desires. In this scenario the animal forms a desire based upon their own beliefs (in this case something relevantly equivalent to ‘x is painful’) which are in turn formed on the basis of sensations they experience during the conditioning.¹⁶ However the sensations that the animal uses to develop these desires in this case are sensations that are forced upon them, without opportunity for them to withdraw. Where an animal is free from interference, they would have some degree of control over the sensations they experience. However through

¹⁵ I take it that an animal could have their agency undermined by being forced into experiencing pleasant sensations too. It is the reduction of one’s control and ownership that undermines one’s agency in these circumstances, not the painfulness of the stimulus. Although an animal that is forced to experience painful sensations obviously suffers a further harm which an animal forced to experience pleasant sensations does not. I discuss the harm of an animal having their agency undermined through having pleasant experiences forced upon them, albeit in a different context, here: (Wilcox 2021)

¹⁶ I make no claim here about the format of animal belief content except that it need not (and likely is not) propositional in nature. For a thorough treatment of the nature of animal beliefs see Bermudez (Bermudez 2008). For an alternative (and briefer) view see Rowlands (Rowlands 2014).

conditioning this control is removed. Limited though it is, this level of control is important. Through an animal choosing not to withdraw from their current experience, an animal expresses assent for their current experience to continue.¹⁷ Thus an animal's control over the sensations they experience is an integral part of their typical desire formation process. Conditioning removes a level of control the animal has over the formation of her desire and so undermines her agency, harming her.

Again, we can also cash out the harm an animal suffers through experiencing conditioning in terms of ownership over the resulting desires. Through the desire-modifying state of conditioning, desires are formed through a process in which the animal's involvement in the formation of these desires was more limited than it would be otherwise. In these circumstances the animal is forced to experience particular sensations and her opportunities to withdraw are removed. She has not actively taken part in this process in the sense that she is not willingly engaging in the conditioning as she has had her opportunity to opt out of the experience removed. Thus the desires that are formed based upon these sensations are plausibly less 'hers', than desires that are rooted in sensations that she has come to experience as a result of living a life in which she is an active agent.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that animals consciously form their desires, or even that the process of desire formation happens at a conscious level in animals (presumably most, if not all, animals do not have any conscious access to this process). However, the fact that a desire is formed in light of her beliefs which in turn were formed in light of the sensations she experienced, in light of choices she made, plausibly gives her some control over such desires in contrast to those desires that are formed otherwise. Further an animal's involvement in the process of forming desires based upon beliefs she has formed, in light of sensations she has experienced, in light of choices she has made, actively involves her in the process of desire formation and thus, plausibly gives her some ownership of desires formed through this process compared to those that are formed otherwise.

This argument also does not imply that an animal that possesses both desires that were formed on the basis of sensations that they assented to, and desires that were formed on the basis of sensations

¹⁷ For a discussion on assent in animals see Healey and Pepper (Healey and Pepper 2021).

that were forced upon them, can recognise themselves having a greater degree of ownership over the former. Nor does this argument assume that an animal will ‘identify’ with some desires but not others, as humans are capable of doing. Through these arguments I merely suggest that a distinction between an animal’s desires being more or less ‘hers’ can in principle be drawn along lines of those she was actively participating in forming and those which she was not.

So according to an ‘Agency Undermining Account’ such as this, an animal exercises her agency through forming her desires. These desires are based on her beliefs, these beliefs are based on sensations she has experienced, and these sensations have been experienced in part because of the choices the animal herself has made about her life, such as where to go, what to do and when. Actions which cause animals to form desires through circumventing or interfering with this process remove an animal’s control or diminish her ownership over the desires she forms. Because of this, an animal’s agency is undermined. The desire-modifying states of neurological manipulation and some forms of conditioning undermine an animal’s agency in just this way.

VI. Other Forms of Desire Modification

Whilst I have only focused on two specific types of desire modifying states, one may have concerns about other desire modifying states. I’ll address several likely concerns here.

Firstly, one might be concerned that if we accept that neurological manipulation and conditioning harm animals, perhaps humans initiating desired-modifying states more generally harms animals and so animals ought to live lives completely independent of humans. Importantly, it is not an implication of this argument that *all* desire-modifying states initiated by humans undermine an animal’s agency. Where an animal is presented with sensations but not forced to experience them, and has opportunity to withdraw or disengage, her agency is not undermined as her control is not removed nor is her ownership over the resulting desire diminished. So using positive reinforcement to

encourage my dog to engage in more socially acceptable behaviour by offering him a biscuit when he walks alongside me to the park for instance, does not seem to be problematic on this account. In this case he is free to refuse the biscuit and not experience the pleasant sensations that will accompany this. Thus the typical desire formation process is not disrupted and his agency is not undermined.

Secondly, one might suggest that there is a vague boundary between cases of desire modifying states which are harmful to animals and states which are not harmful. In response to this point I note that, whilst a vague boundary between the harmful and non-harmful cases is certainly a challenge for moral agents deliberating between courses of actions, this is not a problem for the view I have presented in itself. Vague boundaries are present in many moral problems and it would be unreasonable to expect clear cut answers to the complex moral issues discussed in this paper. I believe it is sufficient for my purposes here to demonstrate clear cases of desire modification which are harmful e.g. neurological manipulation and clear cases of desire modification which are not e.g. voluntary positive reinforcement. That being said, as this is an initial sketch of a novel view, I hope that further work can shed light on boundary cases and provide a more robust principle to guide our actions surrounding modifying animals' desires.¹⁸

Finally, one might argue that this account does not go far enough as it does not explain why many of the desire modifying states we take to be harmful to humans, are harmful for animals. For example, one might point out that the Agency Undermining Account as developed here, cannot explain what is harmful about addiction in animals or some forms of psychosis which in humans appear to be harmful (at least) because they undermine autonomy. Intuitively it seems that if neurological manipulation and conditioning are harmful for animals because they undermine agency, addiction and psychosis may well be too.

In response to this concern I merely note that this is a first attempt at a novel kind of argument against the modification of animals' desires. I make no claim that it is a comprehensive account of the harms animals can suffer through desire modification. What I present here is an attempt to show that

¹⁸ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the vague boundary issue here.

animals can be harmed by some instances of desire modification through having their agency undermined. To illustrate this point I focus on two specific examples. It may be that animals are harmed by addiction and/or psychoses for other reasons, or even that these desire modifying states undermine animals' agency in similar ways to those discussed in this paper. However, only so much can be done within one article and the fact that answers are not provided to these questions here, does not diminish the legitimacy of the Agency Undermining Account, as I have presented it. I hope that further development of the Agency Undermining Account can shed light on the question of whether animals are harmed by other desire modifying states such as addiction and psychoses in themselves and if so how.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that an animal can be harmed by desire-modifying states because desire modification undermines an animal's agency where the process of desire modification circumvents or reduces an animal's control over the formation of, and diminishes their ownership of, new desires. Unlike previous arguments against the modification of animals' desires such as the Teleological Account, the Agency Undermining Account is content neutral, giving an explanation of the harm of modifying animals' desires in itself when it involves particular methods, regardless of the content of the desires the animal forms or loses. Analogous to the best account of the harm of desire modification in humans, the Agency Undermining Account suggests that the harm of desire modification in animals is a result of the process of certain kinds of desire modification themselves.

This argument is not a robust defence of the intuition that animals are harmed by certain desire-modifying states, nor is it supposed to be. It is a sketch of a novel view which has, to the best of my knowledge, not been considered in the animal ethics or animal studies literature. This argument involves several moving parts about which philosophy has said little to date, including notions of animal agency, control, ownership and belief and desire formation. As such, there is clearly further work that needs to be done in order to more appropriately defend this view. Further, there are other

desire-modifying states which intuitively seem to be harmful to animals which this account cannot currently accommodate, such as addiction and certain mental health issues. Thus, there is work to be done to identify why these states might be harmful. Finally, there is also the thorny issue of whether there is any harm associated with animals modifying other animals' desires. Despite these issues being unresolved, it seems to me that this argument is valuable in that it is the first step in a new direction and provides a blueprint for a different kind of argument against desire modification in animals.

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Please cite published version (Forthcoming) in The Journal of Agricultural & Environmental

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