

Flipping the Tank: The Morality of American Pet Fishkeeping

Christiana Hardie

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the moral implications of the American institutional practice of pet fishkeeping. As the number one most popular pet in America, fish occupy an interesting niche of human and animal relationships. This paper attempts to address a gap in animal ethics literature which has yet to examine the relationship between humans and pet fish. Current conditions for pet fish in our society are thoroughly examined, as well as the place of pet fish ethics in the larger field of animal ethics. Adopting a utilitarian lens, this paper evaluates the amount of total suffering endured by pet fish in America against the total amount of possible suffering endured if the practice of pet fishkeeping was eliminated. Through the examination of fish welfare in captivity, medical care, cultural attitudes, and laws on the one hand, and effects on the pet fish industry and individual keepers of fish on the other hand, this paper concludes that suffering by pet fish outweighs that of humans without the practice. Possible objections addressed include advocating for welfarism, the possible improvement of fish lives in captivity, and doubts about the adopted weighting schema. Pet fish suffering is seen as a serious, pressing issue, and one which needs to be addressed further.

# I. Introduction

Ornamental fishkeeping— the practice of housing fish in tanks or other aquarium systems for display— is so common in our society it is almost a cultural obsession. The United States is the number one importer of ornamental fish (AWI, 2015), with fish housed in unnatural spaces so frequently that we hardly bat an eye to see a small aquatic ecosystem in the lobby of a dentist's office or a young child's bedroom. Especially prevalent within the sphere of ornamental fishkeeping is the practice of keeping fish as pets. Pet fish are distinguished from other types of ornamental fish in that they are kept mainly in homes, rather than businesses or public spaces, and are seen as “belonging” specifically to one person or family. With more than 65 million kept in households throughout the United States, fish are the most popular pet in America (Francis-Floyd, 1969, p. 1), marking the practice of pet fishkeeping as both extremely culturally relevant and incredibly popular. But is it morally permissible?

In this paper, I will argue that the current practices of American pet fishkeeping are immoral. I will begin by adopting fish as objects of moral concern, arguing that enough evidence exists to mark them as morally considerable under a utilitarian framework. I will then examine pet fish's place within the field of animal ethics, arguing that it belongs not within the field of companion animal ethics but rather within the field of captive animal ethics. I will go on to review current conditions for fish kept as pets, arguing that pet fish suffer greatly in these conditions. I will then reckon with possible objections, before continuing on to conclude that due to the great suffering endured by pet fish in their current conditions, it is immoral to keep fish as pets.

## II. Animals as Objects of Moral Concern

I will begin by reviewing the main arguments historically used to identify animals as objects of moral concern within animal ethics. To do this, I must first establish what is meant by “moral concern”. To say that a being deserves moral consideration is to say that it is a being that can be wronged in some way (Gruen, 2017, 1). Moral *consideration* is importantly different from moral *significance*—moral significance deals with questions of how to weigh the interests of morally considerable beings against each other (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 311). Recognizing a being as deserving of moral considerability acknowledges that our actions can positively or negatively impact them, and that these interests should be taken into account when making our decisions. Which animals are granted moral considerability, and which animals are not, is dependent on which theoretical framework is used. While there are many different approaches to determining moral considerability in animal ethics, in this paper I will review only the two main frameworks—deontology and consequentialism—before eventually adopting consequentialism as the working framework.

Deontology was first used to argue *against* moral considerability for animals. When put forth by Kant, he argued that the idea of personhood distinguished humans from other animals. Personhood, he argued, was synonymous with rational nature, the quality he saw as making a being *valuable* and thus morally considerable. *Valuable* for Kant meant that a being was seen as an end in itself, not as a means to an end: a being seen as an end in itself has inherent value just for what it is, not for what it can be used for. This means that we must not treat fellow people as mere ways to achieve other goals, but rather as fellow individuals with intentions just as valuable as our own. As animals are irrational, according to Kant, they do not contain personhood and are not admitted to the moral community (Kant, 1798, p. 239). While we may have *indirect* duties to

animals, we do not have *direct* duties to them in the same way we have *direct* duties to fellow humans.

However, this idea of personhood has since been used to make arguments *for* the moral considerability of animals. Christine Korsgaard argues that animals should also be regarded as ends in themselves. Like Kant, she agrees that there is a big difference between those with normative, rational capacities, and those without. However, she argues that it should not only be our rational capacities that we construct as valuable, but also the needs and desires we have as living beings that we share with all other animals. She sees these similarities as reasons to value other animals as equal to or with fellow humans: animals are *persons*, but *rational* persons are importantly different from *non-rational* persons. We, as rational persons, value things that we believe lead to ends that are *absolutely good* and thus worth pursuing. Things can be absolutely good and absolutely bad for other animals as well, she argues, and they can pursue these ends—other animals should thus also be ends in themselves (Korsgaard, 2015, p. 36).

Another deontological argument for the moral considerability of animals is the absolutist position put forth by Tom Regan, more popularly known as the Animal Rights position. Unlike Korsgaard, Regan challenges Kant's idea of personhood. Regan points to the fact that Kant's theory would not allow for irrational humans to possess moral status, and instead puts forth his own criterion for who should be treated as ends in themselves. Regan argued that those with inherent value are those who are “subjects-of-a-life”, defined as individuals who have “...beliefs and desires, perception, memory, sense of the future, emotional life, welfare interests, ability to pursue goals, identity over time, and individual welfare independent of anyone else” (Regan, 2010, p. 243). If a being fits all of these criteria, argues Regan, they are a subject-of-a-life and thus worthy of moral consideration. What distinguishes his ideas further are his claims for moral

significance— for Regan, since animals are, like humans, ends in themselves, they should not be treated in any way that would use them as a means to another end. Any action that fails to treat an animal as a being with inherent worth would violate that animal's right and is thus morally objectionable. This means that, under Regan's Animal Rights position, humans should not eat other animals, hunt other animals, experiment on other animals, or use other animals for entertainment, among countless other common practices. Regan views these practices as wrong *regardless* of human needs, context, or culture— under the Animal Rights position, to treat an animal as a means to some human end is to violate that animal's rights. Of course, this only applies to those animals who possess all of the qualities necessary to be a subject-of-a-life.

The other main moral framework within animal ethics is consequentialism, and more specifically, utilitarianism. Generally, utilitarianism in animal ethics posits that moral *considerability* is dependent on sentience, or the ability to consciously experience positive and negative states such as happiness or suffering, while moral *significance* is dependent on what other morally significant competing claims might be in play in any given situation, as well as the possible extent of one's sentience.

There are many prominent utilitarian philosophers within the field of animal ethics, and two who have been particularly influential are Jeremy Bentham and Peter Singer. Bentham first developed utilitarianism as a theory and applied it to non-human animals in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. In it, he described the tragedy of non-human animals being regarded merely as property, advocating that one day animals be recognized as equal to humans. Most famously, he wrote "...the question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" (Bentham, 1780, 283n). Peter Singer took this idea and expanded on it, further developing and popularizing the idea of sentience within discussions of animal rights in

his work *Animal Liberation*. Singer argued that beings with sentience have an interest in not suffering and that it is this interest that grants them moral consideration. What is truly important for utilitarians is the promotion of happiness, pleasure, and the satisfaction of interests, with the avoidance of pain and suffering (Singer, 1976, p. 4). When it comes to moral significance, the utilitarian generally weighs the interests of all morally considerable beings equally and chooses the outcome which causes the least amount of total suffering and generally benefits the “greater good”.

Deontology and utilitarianism are very different when it comes to both moral considerability and significance. While the animal rights position takes the significance of morally considerable claims to be absolute, the significance of an animal’s morally considerable interests according to a utilitarian is variable. Additionally, the deontologist is concerned not with the consequences of the action but rather with the nature of the action itself, while the utilitarian is focused purely on the consequences and decreasing the total amount of suffering.

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to decide between these dominant traditions. Instead, I will adopt the utilitarian framework and determine moral judgment on the keeping of fish as pets based on the total amount of suffering incurred. This leaves open important questions regarding how a deontological framework would evaluate the relevant issue.

### III. Fish as objects of moral concern

The question thus becomes: are fish objects of moral concern? A small subfield of animal ethics, fish ethics, has tackled this question extensively. Before reviewing this literature, however, I must first clarify what exactly is meant by “fish”. Since I will be focusing

specifically on the most common ornamental fish kept as pets, in this paper I will reduce the scope to only those kinds of animals. While there are many types of ornamental fish kept as fish, I will focus specifically on those kept as common household pets (so kept in tanks or other in-house aquarium systems) and easily accessible to the general public. These animals are usually small fin-fish, with the most common types including betta fish, goldfish, clownfish, guppies, and mollies. This leaves out a large area of fish ethics, as much of the literature in this field focuses on farmed fish and establishing welfare standards for aquaculture.<sup>1</sup> While important fields of inquiry, this research often takes a welfare approach, focusing not on the ethics of a practice itself but rather on the most ethical way to carry out this practice. As such, in this review of fish ethics, I will instead be focusing on those arguments that, under the utilitarian framework, aim to establish fish as objects of moral concern.

Within this realm of fish ethics, there persists a large debate over whether or not fish are truly sentient. Fish were written off from moral consideration in the past due to faulty measurements of fish consciousness and suffering (Arends, 2013, p. 25), one possible reason why pet fish have yet to be brought into the sphere of moral concern. Only recently have scientists and philosophers begun to reconsider the nature and extent of fish sentience and reevaluate their capacity to suffer. The main reason why fish sentience is so contentious is that *suffering*, the determinant factor for sentience, is a quality that is hard both to identify and measure. Suffering is distinct from pure pain as it is not only a physical response to stressors but an emotional experience that consciously internalizes such responses. “Pure pain”, as we understand it, is equatable to nociception— when an animal, such as a human or a fish, is

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<sup>1</sup> See *Expanding the Moral Circle: Farmed Fish as Objects of Moral Concern* (Lund et al., 2007), “The Ethics and Sustainability of Aquaculture” (M. Kaiser, 2012), *The Ethics and Sustainability of Capture Fisheries and Aquaculture* (M. Lam, 2016), and *Finfish Aquaculture: Animal Welfare, the Environment, and Ethical Implications* (J. Bergqvist & S. Gunnarsson, 2011) for more on fish ethics in aquaculture.



physically hurt in some way and the nervous system *unconsciously* responds to the noxious stimulus (Elder, 2014, p.18). However, this is not what is debated within fish ethics– we can clearly prove that nociceptive neuronal pathways are present in fish. Where the debate instead lies is in the question of fish *consciousness*: is unconscious nociception raised to a level of consciousness in fish? In other words, are fish *consciously aware* of the pain?

The problem is that consciousness cannot be directly measured, either in fish or any other non-human vertebrate (Brown, 2014, par. 1). This means, of course, that we can only measure consciousness in indirect ways, which brings us to the heart of the debate: since consciousness cannot be *directly* proved to be present in an animal, we will therefore never be able to fully *prove* that it is present in fish. However, several indirect measures of consciousness have been used to show at least a high probability of consciousness in fish, and I will briefly review those now.

Generally, consciousness can be understood in three forms: access consciousness, phenomenal consciousness, and self-consciousness. All three of these have been shown to be at least suggestively present in fish. Access consciousness, the ability to generate a mental image or representation that guides behavior and decisions, has been observed in fish through the abilities of many fish species to map out their surroundings, infer social rank by observation, and use logical inferences to direct their decisions (Elder, 2014, p.19). Measuring access consciousness in these ways can give us a picture of how fish perceive information about the world and how this affects their behavior; the use of mental representations to guide various behaviors in these instances implies a presence in some capacity of access consciousness in fish. Phenomenal consciousness, the experience of sensing your surroundings and generating an emotional response, has proven to be more difficult to identify in fish. Mainly this is due to the

fact that humans cannot directly communicate with fish, and are thus unable to discern an emotional response (Elder, 2014, p.17). However, certain species of fish have been proven to have surges of hormones while watching other fish fight, while others have specific areas of the brain associated with processing emotion and evidence which alter their view of adverse situations depending on the context (Braithwaite, 2010, p. 58). While still not enough to fully prove phenomenal consciousness in fish, the current research is suggestive that it may be present in at least some species. Finally, self-consciousness, defined as the ability to consider one's own actions and consider the consequences, has also been indirectly shown in fish (Elder, 2014, p.20). Cooperative behavior is one indicator of self-consciousness often used by scientists, as "...such behavior would be impossible unless both (parties) understood the implications of their own actions" (Elder, 2014, p.20). Fish engage in a wide variety of cooperative behaviors, living in complex social communities with stable cultural traditions and engaging in social interactions such as reconciliation (Brown, 2014, par. 59). While only one indicator of self-consciousness, cooperative behavior is strongly evident in fish, suggesting that fish could very well be capable of self-consciousness.

With strong evidence pointing to fish exhibiting some extent of all three forms of evidence, the majority of the literature on fish ethics argues that even if fish cannot directly be proven to be sentient, for the sake of future arguments and welfare considerations for fish we can assume them to be sentient unless proved otherwise. Under this precedent set by fish ethics, I will adopt the belief that fish are sentient and thus capable of suffering, marking them as objects of moral concern under the utilitarian framework.

## IV. Companions or Captives?

Having thus adopted fish as objects of moral concern, we can now introduce to philosophical consideration the complex relationship between humans and pet fish. This is an ethical realm that has not yet been thoroughly examined or established, therefore lacking a place in the field. While it may seem obvious at first to place ethical discussions of this nature within the sphere of companion animal ethics, I will argue instead that discussions of pet fish belong in the field of *captive* animal ethics.

I will begin by first reviewing companion animal ethics, establishing which animals belong to these discussions (and why pet fish are not one of them). Generally, companion animal ethics mainly deals with the ethics of dependency, both on an individual and species level. On an individual level, companion animal ethics explores the complexities of having a specific animal dependent on its human “owner” for all it needs to survive. On a species level, it explores the idea that we have bred certain animals to be compliant, servile, and unable to flourish without human support (Palmer & Kasperbauer, 2022, p. 4). Individual companion animals often form an emotional dependency on their owners because of this (Yeates & Savulescu, 2017, 3.1), and some species have even been created and modified through millennia of breeding practices to facilitate their lives with human beings (Fulfer, 2018). These are not issues that pertain to pet fish. While pet fish become individually dependent on their owners to keep them alive, this is not a feature unique to companion animals— any living thing stripped of its agency will depend on its sole provider, as it has no other options. On a species level, no breeds of finfish have been specifically bred to be emotionally dependent on humans. Most fish that are kept as pets live perfectly well in their wild habitat, and even if pet fish were released into their natural waters, they would be able to easily adapt and survive (Arends, 2013, p. 25). Fish are thus excluded from

most companion animal texts for this reason, with the scope of Western companion animal ethics generally limited to domesticated dogs and cats.

So if pet fish do not belong in the field of companion animal ethics, yet they are often lumped into the same category as companion animals, where do they belong? Here we must make an important distinction between *companion animals* and *pets*. Palmer and Kasperbauer (2022) put forth 5 criteria for an animal to be considered a pet:

(A pet is...) a being that is affectionately regarded by its owner (so not a pest); lives in or close to the home; is mobile (so not a plant); lives a life different in kind from its owner's (so not a human); possesses its own interests—that is, its life can go better or worse for it, and it has a welfare or a good of its own, and it depends on its owner in significant ways to help fulfill its interests. (p. 2)

A companion animal, on the other hand, is an animal that satisfies all of these conditions with the added element of companionship as a “kind of interactive bond, where humans and animals recognize and are responsive to one another, and seek one another’s company” (Palmer & Kasperbauer, 2022). In this way, a companion animal is more about a relationship between a human and an animal, whereas a pet is more about individual human ownership of an animal. It is clear, then, that fish are *pets*, rather than *companion animals*, and would thus then be placed in the field of *pet ethics* (other animals included in pet ethics would be reptiles, amphibians, birds, insects, or other animals kept by humans for entertainment value but which do not provide companionship). However, the field of pet ethics has not yet been developed as a stand-alone field within animal ethics, with very little thus far written on the topic. Because of this, pet ethics will need to be discussed within the realm of another field of animal ethics; I will now argue that *captive animal ethics* is the rightful realm of discussion for pet ethics.

The field of captive animal ethics is mainly restricted to captivity concerns of wild animals in places such as zoos and aquariums, focusing on four main areas of moral concern: liberty, autonomy, dignity, and well-being (Gruen, 2014, p.2). The value of liberty, nature of autonomy, meaning of dignity, and quality of well-being for an animal are concepts that can generally be understood as coming under fire when animals are denied their freedom and entirely dependent on the will of a human captor. This is frequently the case for pets—pets are, more often than not, denied the ability to move, eat, sleep, and play as they choose. Instead, they are restricted by the will of their captor, unable to fully flourish as individual beings. Additionally, pets' isolation from other animals puts the animals in a state of social captivity, in which they cannot interact with other animals as they normally would. Pet fish are subject to all of these restrictions, kept in tanks which limit the scope of their movement from a vast ocean to a few gallons. They are often kept alone or with a small number of other fish, vastly different from the social communities of their natural habitats. And, as will be discussed in the next section, their well-being as pets is significantly decreased from their well-being in their natural habitat. Seeing as these fish do not provide companionship for their human captors, and themselves do not get anything in return, we can thus conclude that discussions of pet fish's rightful place is in the field of captive animal ethics.

## V. Evaluation of the Practice

Having thus reviewed captive animal ethics and established pet fish as objects of moral concern within that field, it is time to determine whether or not the American practice of pet fishkeeping is morally permissible. To do this, we must first review the suffering of pet fish and the potential suffering caused by ending the practice of pet fishkeeping.

Before we begin to review the suffering of pet fish, an approach to animal welfare must be decided upon to determine the quality of a pet fish's life. Welfare in this instance is defined as how one should analyze the mental and physical state of an animal to determine what is and is not in an animal's best interest. 3 main approaches to animal welfare are generally accepted, which I will now review as laid out by Clare Palmer and Peter Sandøe in "For Their Own Good: Captive Cats and Routine Confinement". The first of these is the *preferences* approach to animal welfare. This approach suggests that animals have good welfare when their preferences and desires are met and satisfied. Recent philosophical work accepts that it is possible to make sense of animal preferences— that we can determine which states animals would prefer to be in based on what they choose. This approach to welfare is the one commonly used for humans: we value the ability to live a life in which we can make our own choices and live the life we choose. The second approach to animal welfare is the perfectionist approach. This approach posits that a good life for an animal is a *natural* one— being able to live in accordance with their "nature". An animal's "nature" is usually understood per their species, and each species has distinct characteristics inherent to them that are deemed "natural". Under the perfectionist approach, the closer an animal can live to its "natural" state, the better its life and well-being will be. A final approach to animal welfare is the hedonistic view of animal welfare. This approach posits that what makes for a good life for an animal is how that animal *feels*. Under a hedonistic approach, a good life for an animal is one in which it can avoid *suffering*. This approach advocates for the avoidance of suffering and the pursuit of pleasure as the hallmark of a good life and thus good welfare. When aiming to improve animal welfare, this approach would work to reduce as many causes of suffering as possible (Palmer and Sandøe, 2014, pp. 138-142).

For the sake of our argument, I will argue that the hedonistic approach to animal welfare is best suited to examine pet fish. As reviewed earlier, under the utilitarian moral framework the most important goal is maximizing utility— that is, increasing happiness and reducing suffering. Therefore, to remain consistent in the utilitarian view, it follows that welfare ought to be evaluated through an examination of the total suffering endured. If all was evaluated via the amount of suffering incurred, the utilitarian could then easily see which options contain the *least* suffering, and make a decision from there.

I will now evaluate the current conditions of pet fish using this hedonistic approach to animal welfare. I will begin with reviewing the literature on the welfare of fish living in captivity as pets, before going on to discuss how pet fish are given medical care, how cultural norms affect how they are treated, and how laws and policies protect (or fail to protect) their welfare interests. After reviewing these sources, I will conclude that the majority of pet fish suffer greatly in their current conditions.

Many scientific studies have been conducted on the welfare of fish in captivity, finding over and over again that fish experience much less suffering and can pursue much more pleasure when they are kept in their natural habitats rather than in captivity. Fish are unable to express their natural behavior patterns when kept in captivity (Brown, 2014, par. 5), and often experience states of stress, boredom, and frustration (Born Free USA, 2023, p. 9). Additionally, many fish are often kept in suboptimal conditions for what their species needs. The number one cause of mortality in pet fish is poor water quality, with 81% of fish held in water outside their normal pH range and 36% kept in water outside their normal temperature range (Huntingford et al., 2006, p. 358). Fish are frequently placed in tanks that are much too small (AWI, 2015, para. 5), oftentimes with other species they are not compatible with. In fact, in 19% of ornamental fish

tanks prey were housed in small tanks in direct contact with predators (Huntingford et al., 2006, p. 358). This contact with predators either led to mortality or extreme stress for the prey fish. If not placed with predators, fish are instead often deprived of social contact at all and placed in social isolation, further negatively affecting their behavior patterns (Huntingford et al., 2006, p. 358).

With evidence showing that captivity leads to great amounts of suffering in pet fish, it is clear that the pursuit of pleasure is quite difficult for them to achieve. How pet fish are handled medically also represents a realm of great suffering for them. The most frequent medical treatment for pet fish is no treatment at all— when a fish owner sees that their fish is sick, they do not tend to bring the fish to the vet. This is partially because most small animal vets do not include fish in their practice (Francis-Floyd, 1969, p. 1). There are a multitude of reasons for this, the most prominent being the institutional barrier of many veterinary schools still not offering aquatic animal medicine in their curriculum. There are also limited resources available for treating and studying pet fish, causing disease processes to be poorly understood and, even if a fish were to receive treatment, providing limited therapeutic options (Francis-Floyd, 1969, p. 2).<sup>2</sup> Often, when people know that they cannot bring their fish to a vet for medical care, they will go to or call the pet store from which they purchased the fish to try and seek care there (Alley et al., 2021, p. 64). Unfortunately, pet stores cannot provide adequate care for sick fish, as employees at pet stores are not licensed to diagnose or prescribe medications. However, many of them still provide medical opinions, the majority of which are incorrect or misguided (Alley et al., 2021, p. 64). These can be quite harmful to the fish, as they are often misdiagnosed and given

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<sup>2</sup> While an abundance of research studies diseases of wild fish, the majority of illnesses in pet fish result from the improper conditions in which they are being held, thus creating a new field of illnesses to be researched and understood (Hongslo & Jansson, 2009).



over-the-counter treatment, worsening rather than helping their condition. Pet fish owners will also often rely on non-scientific manuals or sources to care for their fish when veterinary care is unavailable (Alley et al., 2021, p. 64), leading to further mistreatment of sick fish. This lack of proper medical treatment for pet fish only perpetuates the suffering earlier established by the conditions in which they are kept.

Cultural attitudes additionally serve as perpetrators of pet fish suffering. In American society, pet fish are often seen as “starter” or “not real” pets. This is exemplified by a pet fish’s apparent “replaceability”-- when one pet fish dies, you simply get another one, without mourning the original fish (Redmalm, 2015, p. 21). Fish are often given out as prizes at places such as county fairs, where they are kept in small plastic bags and given to people who may have little to no regard for the fish’s life. Fish owners also typically show little affection towards pet fish, viewing them, as one sociological study found, as “not even alive in the first place” (Redmalm, 2015, p. 7). When fish keeping becomes too much for people (when a fish grows too big for its tank, or the owner simply gets bored with keeping a fish), they are often released back into the wild with little regard for what will become of them (Schuppli et al., 2014), in ways we do not discard of other pets we can no longer take care of. These attitudes towards pet fish only increase their overall suffering: when the people who are holding pet fish captive do not regard them as beings worthy of moral consideration, they are not treated as such.

Finally, pet fish are also not protected under many of the welfare laws other pets and companion animals are. Despite a massive trade industry in pet fish, there are still very few species protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). This means that there are fewer regulations regarding how these animals have to be treated in trade and transport (AWI, 2015, par. 16). Additionally, the Animal

Welfare Act, which is the chief federal law concerning animals in the US, does not include “fish” in its definition of animal and thus provides no welfare protections for these animals (ALDF, 2022, par. 5). This means that pet fish’s welfare does not legally have to be taken into consideration, technically allowing for them to endure multitudes of suffering without consequences. Without protections under the law, all of the previous ways in which pet fish endure suffering cannot be punished. Instead, they must simply endure it.

I have thus shown that the current institutional practice of pet fishkeeping causes a great deal of suffering for the fish under a hedonistic welfare approach, but the question still remains: is it morally permissible? Can all of their suffering be justified? To answer this question, we will need to examine who would suffer if fish were no longer kept as pets. People employed within the pet sales industry, trade industry, catching and breeding industry, aquarium industry, and fish food industry would suffer as their industries would take a hit and many of them may lose their jobs. Additionally, pet fish owners would suffer to some extent as they would no longer have the positive experiences associated with having a pet fish in their homes.<sup>3</sup> However, 65 million fish are kept as pets in the US, and we have shown that they clearly suffer. So is it justified? Let’s weigh the consequences.

On the one hand, you have the 65 million fish kept in the US as pets. It is estimated (see above) that the vast majority of these fish are kept in poor conditions and subjected to improper care. Being extremely generous, let’s say that only 1/2 of the fish currently kept as pets in the US are enduring great suffering— great suffering being defined as conditions in which it is nearly

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<sup>3</sup> “Positive experiences” in this instance refers to a wide umbrella of effects pet fishkeeping can have on owners. This includes mental and physical health benefits, educational opportunities (alternatively constructed as the building of “appreciation” for aquatic life), and general joy in having a pet (Clements et al., 2019; Duncan, 2022). This could also include the various pleasures humans may get from feelings of superiority, exploitation, and schadenfreude associated with having dominance over an animal— see *Utilitarianism and Animal Cruelty: Further Doubts* (Davies, 2017) for a more detailed discussion on including “other pleasures” in utilitarian weighing schemes.

impossible to pursue pleasures, and a life filled almost entirely with pain. That is still over 32 million lives which are lived in this state.

On the other hand, you have humans who could potentially lose their jobs and livelihoods without the pet fish industry. In 2023, 162,806 people were employed in the Pet Stores industry in the US (IBIS, 2023). Again being generous, let's say that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of those people lose their jobs when the pet fish industry disappears. That is around 122,000 people losing their jobs. Now let's say (rather unrealistically) that roughly the *same amount of people* would lose their jobs in *every industry* involved with pet fish. So 122,000 people would lose their jobs in the industries of ornamental fish trade, fish catching and breeding, aquariums, and fish food. For the sake of being thorough, let's say that 3 other unspecified industries are also tangentially affected by the removal of the pet fish industry, and 366,000 more people lose their jobs. That is still only 976,000 people. And of these 976,000, the majority would not be living in states of great suffering— they would be suffering, but it would not be nearly impossible for them to pursue pleasures.

What about the individual owners of pet fish, whose positive experiences gained from owning pet fish would be taken from their lives with the disappearance of the pet fishkeeping practice? This is a significantly higher number of individuals— an estimated 11.1 million households have pet fish in the US (Megna, 2024), and working off of the average that there are 2.6 people per household, that is around 28.86 million people who would be negatively affected. Combined, a very generous, loose estimate of almost 30 million people would, in some way, suffer from the loss of the pet fishkeeping practice. However, that number is still not as high as half of the fish kept as pets in the US. And even if the number were higher, the *intensity* of the suffering is still not comparable to that endured by the fish— the weight of losing your job, your

livelihood, and potentially having your life uprooted, or the loss of a small number of positive experiences in your life, is nowhere near the scale of having the duration of your life spent in conditions which are fundamentally unfit for your well being. We can thus confidently assert that the suffering of fish kept as pets far outweighs that of the humans who may be affected by the halting of the practice.

## VI. Objections

Of course, one could look at this argument and claim that what I have purported to show has not really been shown— a nuanced examination of the potential benefits and harms involved is *not* a blanket condemnation, and furthermore, I am providing a false dichotomy: is there not a third, least-amount-of-suffering option in which the conditions pet fish are currently kept in are improved, thus reducing suffering both for fish and preserving the pet fishkeeping practice? Why, then, the objector might argue, should we ban the practice as a whole, when this option exists?

This is a common objection raised in the political sphere of animal advocacy, with the debate between welfarism and abolitionism highly contested and frequently discussed. In this instance, the objector is arguing that a welfare approach to pet fishkeeping— improving regulations and standards for all of the areas of concern I had addressed— would result in *less* suffering than the abolitionist approach, and is therefore, under the framework I have adopted, *not* the option which most maximizes utility.

While tempting, it is simply not the case that improving the welfare of pet fish would reduce their suffering to the point of falling below that of the potential suffering endured by humans without the practice. For one, the way that humans perceive pet fish has been proven to

be and will remain to be *fundamentally* biased. As discussed earlier when addressing the American cultural attitudes toward pet fish, most pet fish owners have an inherent lack of empathy towards pet fish, due to their inability to connect with them in the same way they do other animals: when owners only interact with pets through a tank, there is an inherent separation between human and animal (Redmalm, 2015, p. 21). This belief– that pet fish are not morally on par with humans (or other animals, for that matter), and are therefore less worthy of moral consideration– is so deeply rooted in our minds that it affects how we treat fish even on an unconscious level ( Sebo, 2023, para. 25). This is not something that can be changed through welfare regulations, and even if all other conditions were improved, the fundamental bias would remain– and it is this fundamental bias which prevents humans from understanding the suffering endured by fish.

If this is the case, the objector might say, why not focus on *changing* this bias– would educating pet fish owners on the sentience (and thus moral considerability) of fish not fix this problem without needing to abolish the practice altogether? This is not, however, something that can be feasibly done. For one, there is no evidence that regulations of this kind– working to change biases in an attempt to alter behavior– succeed whatsoever in changing people's behavior (Francione & Garner, 2010, p. 26). For another, the very *nature* of pet fishkeeping itself reinforces these biases. Perpetuating a practice in which animals are *property* fundamentally stands in the way of being able to recognize them as moral equals (Francione & Garner, 2010, p. 140), thus standing in the way of them being treated as such. Additionally, as brought up before, these are not only personal biases, but cultural norms. Changing individual biases would not be enough– the very culture around pet fishkeeping would need to be altered.

But say, for the sake of argument, that the objector is right— say we *can* change personal biases and cultural norms surrounding pet fishkeeping. This would still not be enough to tip the scales of suffering towards welfare. Even if conditions were ideal, minds fundamentally changed, and biases overwritten, there is always going to be suffering endured by pet fish just from being in captivity at all. Captive conditions, no matter how closely related to the fish’s natural habitat, will never be able to provide the diversity of habitats and conditions that are found in the wild and meet all of the physical and psychological needs of fish (AWI, 2015). Additionally, restrictions of captivity— limitations of natural behavior patterns and boredom, to name a few (Born Free USA, 2023, p. 9)— can lead to chronic stress in captive fish, regardless of the condition they are kept in (Brown, 2014, par. 5). Chronic stress is a source of great suffering for fish, as it affects their behavior patterns, physiological state, and overall health (Prentice et al., 2022, para. 1). While pet fish suffering would be significantly less with improved conditions, it would still persist, and still greatly outweigh that of the human suffering potentially involved.

To this, the objector might bring up the idea that there may be instances where a fish’s quality of life could be *improved* by being in captivity. What if, they might argue, in a well-enough maintained aquarium (and, for the purposes of our argument, we are still restricting our definition of “pet fish” to those kept in tanks or other in-home aquarium systems) with keepers who recognize the proposed sentience of fish, fish have access to better food, shelter, and protection from predators than they would in their natural habitat? Additionally, wouldn’t they be safe from the human threats of habitat destruction or environmental change they might encounter in the wild? If this were true, it would be a compelling reason to maintain the practice of pet fishkeeping. However, even in these conditions, the suffering of fish in captivity would still carry the greatest weight. For one, fish living in captivity face stressors in vastly different

ways than fish in the wild face stressors. In the wild, fish live in large social communities, in which stressors are faced as a collective and understood as a part of their lives. In captivity, however, the stressors fish face (as mentioned previously) are not those established by their social communities and are thus harder for them to face. Additionally, the stressors are of different scales— problems of predation, lack of food or shelter, or environmental change are *individual issues* fish *may* face in their lifetime. None of these are a given, and even if they were, they are mere instances in a fish's life, not the very mode of its existence. The effects of captivity on fish, on the other hand (such as chronic stress), affect their entire life and livelihood. The life of a fish when placed in captivity is fundamentally changed and its physical and physiological state fundamentally decreases. There is no facing the problem— fish cannot escape captivity the way they can escape a predator, find alternate food sources or shelter, or adapt to changes. Instead, they are forced to live their lives in conditions not suited for their well-being. Even when pet fish suffering is lowered to this extent, it is still far greater than any human suffering. A pet fish kept in the best of conditions is still going to suffer more than a human placed in the worst of situations from the loss of the practice.

A final objection could be raised on this point. The objector might argue that the weighting scheme used, in which the suffering of one fish is equal to the suffering of one human, is fundamentally flawed. This fails to acknowledge, the objector might argue, fundamental differences between humans and fish which place their experiences of suffering on different levels. This question of moral significance is not one which is ignored in utilitarian animal ethics. The idea that different animals experience different amounts of happiness and suffering at an individual and cumulative level has been used in the past to argue that animals such as individual elephants carry more utility weight than animals such as individual ants. This is due,

they argue, to differences in life spans and complexity of neurological systems. Under this view, larger animals will have more complex nervous systems, which means that they could have the capacity for *more* suffering at any given time. Additionally, longer lifespans mean they will be able to experience more happiness and suffering *across time* (in expectation). Thus, larger animals with longer life spans have *more at stake*, and should thus be given more consideration than other animals (Sebo, 2023, para. 16). In this instance, of course, the human would be seen as the larger animal with greater longevity, and the interests of individual humans should therefore be weighted higher than the interests of individual fish. This view, the objector could argue, may tip the scale of overall suffering towards humans.

However, there are several problems with this analysis. First, weighting schemes in general are hard to quantify for the same reasons that suffering in non-human animals is hard to quantify: we can never truly understand exactly *what it is like* to suffer as another animal. While indicators such as neurological complexity and life span may be good benchmarks for the intensity of suffering, they are just as easily open to scrutiny. For example, complexity is only one aspect of neurons that affect suffering— other factors, such as how they are arranged, could provide totally different indications (Sebo, 2023, para. 13). Lifespans may also not mean the same to animals as they do to us— different animals may experience the passage of time differently, and thus feel the impacts of suffering in vastly different ways. These are things that are hard for us to understand, and make it difficult to instate concrete weighting schemas which take all of these factors into account.

Even if a different weighting schema were adopted, and the suffering of one fish was given less weight than the suffering of one human, the amount of fish kept in captivity still far



outweighs that of humans affected. No matter how you approach it, keeping fish as pets will always be the outcome with the most total suffering.

## VII. Conclusion

Thus, we can finally conclude that the American practice of pet fishkeeping is not morally justifiable. We have first established that fish have the capacity to suffer and thus are objects of moral concern. We have then brought the relationship of humans and pet fish into the realm of animal ethics and argued its place within captive animal ethics. Finally, we have reviewed the suffering endured by pet fish and weighed it against the suffering that would be endured without pet fish, and having found that there is far greater suffering in continuing to keep fish as pets, concluded that it is morally impermissible to have pet fish.

There would be several consequences to halting the keeping of fish as pets. In the short term, many people would have pet fish already which they would then have to decide what to do with. In this case, the best option would be to keep the fish alive to the best of their ability and simply not replace it. Pet stores that had fish stocked for sale would need to decide what to do with those fish, and would probably be recommended to take the same course of action as those with current fish as pets. A problem may be raised of who would be best suited to take care of these fish for the duration of their lives— people with current pet fish or a desire to keep pet fish would most likely be the most viable option for this, as pet stores would not be able to provide suitable conditions for multitudes of fish for the duration of their lives. Manufacturers of fish tanks, catchers and breeders of fish, and other individuals involved in the industry would need to decide what to do with new items that no longer had a use.

In the long term, as discussed earlier, several industries would be greatly affected. Many people may lose their jobs or businesses that rely on the pet fish industry. There would be a surplus of fish tanks and decorations which would no longer have any use. The waters in which pet fish are normally caught may become overpopulated with pet fish, and the ecosystem of these waters may be disturbed.

Directions for future work would include broadening and further developing the field of pet ethics, examining more closely its relationship to captivity, and bringing other animals into it. Future work could also take ideas of pet fish ethics to other instances of fish in captivity, such as in public display aquariums or zoos. More work could also be done on evaluating fish's place within weighting schemas, determining how much moral significance to give fish when compared with other animals. Differences in approaches to fish ethics between various species and types of fish could also be examined, in pet fish ethics and in other areas of study.

The evaluation of suffering endured by pet fish is not merely a theoretical exercise: the suffering shown to be endured by millions of pet fish every day is very real, and something which should not be taken lightly. It is my hope that pet fish are not just examined from a philosophical standpoint, but from an empathetic one as well. Even if the abolition of pet fishkeeping does not happen anytime soon, the suffering of pet fish should still be acknowledged and understood as a serious issue affecting real lives, and more research and progress in this area is desperately needed. In the end, however, only abolition can reduce their suffering the most.

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