



Currents in Conservation: Navigating Tragic Conflict with Justice and Compassion

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Abstract

Breaking with the orthodoxy, Compassionate Conservationists have taken issue with the way that individual wild animals are routinely sacrificed for the sake of species preservation or for the good of the ecosystem. Though explicitly aligning themselves with virtue ethics, there has been some confusion about what this means in practice. How is the perfectly compassionate person to act when the choice is between intentionally harming animals and protecting biodiversity? And what if the choice is between direct and indirect harm to animals? Some critics suggest that when faced with these kinds of conflicts of value, Compassionate Conservationists will invariably base their choices either on the arbitrary feelings an action elicits in them, or else revert back to the decision-making procedures that characterize Traditional Conservation. In response, I argue (first) that these critics fail to appreciate that compassion often plays an essential role in moral deliberation. Second, that being compassionate matters even if it does not end up having a discernable effect on what one chooses to do. When one is faced with a tragic predicament in which harming individual animals is unavoidable, for instance, it matters here that one respond with an appropriate compassion. Third, that even when a situation's difficulty requires one to appeal to the impersonal norms of justice, here too it is required that one proceed with compassion. I end by illustrating these points through the close consideration of a case study: New Zealand's controversial predator extermination campaign.

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Introduction

From its inception, conservation biology has concerned itself with the promotion of biodiversity and the “protection of the integrity and continuity of natural processes,” even when this comes at the expense of the welfare of individual wild animals (Soule, 1985, 731). However, in the last decade, an increasing number of conservationists, who self-identify as ‘Compassionate Conservationists,’ have begun to question the ethical commitments that have hitherto shaped the field (Bekoff, 2010; Ramp & Bekoff, 2015; Wallach et al., 2018, 2020; Batavia et al., 2020, 2021). Their contention is that the near-exclusive focus on values residing at the level of the ecosystem has resulted in a comparative lack of concern for what they call ‘wildlife individuals.’ By contrast, Compassionate Conservationists advocate for a virtue-based approach¹ centered primarily on the exercise of compassion (Wallach et al., 2018).

To be clear, there is much that both sides agree on. Compassionate Conservationists do not deny, for instance, that biodiversity matters (Bekoff, 2013; Ramp & Bekoff, 2015; Wallach et al., 2020), and Traditional Conservationists allow that compassion for wildlife individuals can coexist alongside sound conservation science (Hayward et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there are serious differences. Coghlan and Cardilini (2022) put it thus: whereas Traditional Conservationists “hold that the moral threshold for intentionally harming or killing sentient animals for conservation is relatively low. In contrast, compassionate conservationists say this moral threshold is relatively high” (5). Finding it much less acceptable to sacrifice individuals for the good of collectives (species, ecosystems), Compassionate Conservationists can here be interpreted as both rejecting the kind of consequentialist calculus that is commonplace in Traditional Conservation (see, e.g., Hampton et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2020), and also as recognizing in wildlife individuals a comparatively greater moral significance.

Despite these clear ideological differences, there has remained some confusion as to what a compassionate approach to conservation entails in practice. More specifically, Rohwer & Marris write that “it is unclear what the virtuous compassionate conservationist would do in cases where there really is no nonlethal option or... when the central goal of conservation—the preservation of biodiversity—cannot be reconciled with compassion” (2019, 781–782). In other words, would a Compassionate Conservationist ever think it justified to intentionally harm or kill wildlife individuals and, if so, under what circumstances? Could it be compassionate, for instance, to engage in the selective killing of a certain animal if it would prevent a future event of mass starvation among that population? And what if we could be certain that the eradication of all the invasive predators on a certain island would save the native birds threatened with extinction—could a perfectly compassionate person assent to that? While Compassionate Conservationists have at times suggested that such conflicts of value can be overcome by trying harder to find “creative” and “unconventional” strategies that

¹ Although some recent commentators have rightly suggested that Compassionate Conservation can potentially be thought of as combining elements of deontology as well as virtue ethics (e.g., Coghlan & Cardilini, 2022; Bobier & Allen, 2022), here I will be following Wallach et al.’s (2018) lead and thinking of it strictly in terms of virtue theory.

either do not result in harm to individuals (Batavia et al., 2020, 1119), or that provide “mutually beneficial solutions” for both the ecosystem and for wildlife (Wallach et al., 2018, 1260), it cannot be denied that often there are cases in which no such strategies exist. Thus, the question remains: What guidance, if any, does Compassionate Conservation provide for responding to and navigating situations in which values conflict? The bulk of the debate has centered precisely on this issue, with detractors arguing essentially that Compassionate Conservation offers little of substance.

In what follows, I defend Compassionate Conservation against some of the major objections that have so far been leveled against it. We shall see that what they all have in common is a failure to understand the role that compassion can play in moral deliberation, how it contributes to a determination of what it is right to do. Particularly in the context of conservation, compassion is useful, I argue, because it alerts one to the fact that many of the choices that need to be made are tragic—tragic, insofar as it is inevitable that animals suffer or die as a result of what one does (or does not do). This heightened understanding afforded to us by compassion is worth attaining, first, because it instructs on how a situation requires one to respond (e.g., with appropriate grief); and second, because it will have significant impacts on how one acts—both directly and indirectly. And though I admit that there will be cases in which it is necessary to appeal to the relatively impersonal proceedings of justice in order to adjudicate between conflicting claims, even then I argue that doing so with compassion is crucial—crucial because without it one risks losing sight of the very evil that justice should have as its aim to address.

First Objection: Compassionate Conservation is Extreme and Dogmatic

Early proponents of Compassionate Conservation have tended to define their platform in terms of the tenet “first, do no harm” (Bekoff, 2010; Ramp & Bekoff, 2015; Wallach et al., 2018). Interpreting it as an ‘inflexible rule,’ some critics have worried that its adoption would lead to a ‘hands off’ or ‘do nothing’ approach, with potentially catastrophic consequences for biodiversity (Griffin et al., 2020; Callen et al., 2020). While they grant that, all things being equal, a conservation policy that does not intentionally inflict harm on wildlife is preferable to one that does, sometime, they argue, there exist other values that ought to take precedence. Compassionate Conservationists, however, do not allow even *for the possibility* that the good of biodiversity may override the interests of wildlife individuals. And so, it seems appropriate to ask: does this dogmatic adherence to a principle of non-violence even merit the title of ‘conservation’ to begin with (Driscoll & Watson, 2019, 779)? And would it not instead be more accurate to call it “animal liberation... dressed up as conservation” (Callen et al., 2020, 2).

In a similar vein, Hampton et al. (2018) take issue with what they see as Compassionate Conservationist’s single-minded “focus on the plight of animals intentionally affected by human intervention,” arguing that it comes “at the cost of considering welfare outcomes for animals affected in a more indirect way” (757). For instance, they seem to simply take it for granted that to kill invasive wildlife via the introduction of predators is preferable to just doing it oneself. But what if we could ensure a less painful death with the latter method? Surely that should at least speak in its

favor. Relatedly, there may also be cases when intentional killing can prevent greater foreseeable harm (such as when unchecked population growth leads to death by starvation). Insofar as Compassionate Conservationists are not able to appreciate competing considerations such as these, then it seems like here too an inflexible adherence to a single principle prevents them from being able to take into account all that should matter to us. An approach such as this can only be said to ‘solve’ moral conflict by denying its existence, by fixating on one variable and sidelining all other considerations that clash with it. It is for this reason that Compassionate Conservation poses a threat to the profession. Or at least, so goes that line of argumentation.

These concerns, if true, certainly ought to give one pause. Fortunately, I do not think they actually describe Compassionate Conservation’s philosophical position on the role of rules in moral deliberation. In Bekoff’s first articulation of the approach in 2010, he never once spoke of the core tenant “first, do no harm” as anything approaching an inviolable rule; instead, he called it a “guiding principle” (24). Batavia et al. (2020, 2021) have written that compassion isn’t so much about acting in a prescribed way (2021), but about *responding* appropriately to the suffering of others (2020). Wallach et al. (2018) describe their commitment to non-violence as an ideal, an ‘aspiration,’ towards which an ‘effort’ must be made. And Ramp and Bekoff (2015) acknowledge that decision-making cannot be driven by compassion alone, but must also include a consideration of the other values potentially at play. In all these instances, Compassionate Conservationists seem to have aligned themselves with the Aristotelian view that principles are better conceived *not* as constraints on conduct, but as rules of thumb that also require a consideration of context, as well as good judgment, for their proper implementation (see Nussbaum, 1986).

If we are to understand Compassionate Conservationists in this way, as working within the tradition of virtue ethics, then for them right action cannot be something determined in advance, but instead must be a matter of “fitting one’s choice to the complex requirements of a concrete situation, taking all of its contextual features into account” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 303). The idea here is that our moral life is far too varied, complex, and indeterminate for it to be reasonable to expect that a simple set of principles will always guide us though it with grace and success. Coming to know the right course of action must also and in the first place require the exercise of moral perception (see Blum, 1994, 30–61). Moral perception can be defined here as the capacity—gained over time through teaching and experience—to meaningfully interpret, discriminate between, and judge the practical relevance of concrete, situational particulars. When one perceives correctly, it is because they are sensitive to the moral significance of context and the requirements that it imposes on behavior (McDowell, 1979). And so, ‘right conduct,’ far from being something that can be deduced according to a pre-given calculus or achieved through the rote application of rules, stems rather from insight “originat[ing] in the very way the agent sees her circumstances, and this way of seeing does not admit of definitive codification” (Clarke, 2011, p. 230).

All of this is not to say that general principles play no role in guiding ethical conduct—they most surely do. But principles function now, in Nussbaum’s (1986) words, more as “perspicuous descriptive summaries of good judgements, valid only to the extent to which they correctly describe such judgments. They are normative only

insofar as they transmit in economical form the normative force of the good concrete decisions of the wise person” (299). Rules can thus provide guidance across many cases that share certain elements in common. In this way, they serve as a reminder of “the sort of importance a property *can* have in suitable circumstances” (Dancy, 1993, p. 67). Understood in this way (as a guiding principle), the core tenet of Compassionate Conservation—“first, do no harm”—can be said to function as an admonition that, in general, the perfectly compassionate person will take the fact that a certain course of action causes suffering as a reason not to do it. But this, of course, does not bar the possibility that there be cases in which the ideally compassionate person sees it to be required of them to deliberately cause harm (perhaps for the sake of biodiversity, or to prevent an instance of far greater indirect harm). Such an act would of course be wrong—a violation of a commitment that a compassionate person holds dear—while being at the same time the ‘right’ thing to do given the circumstances. And so, rather than being extreme and dogmatic, Compassionate Conservation in fact presents us with a model of deliberation in which openness to the possibility of a plurality of values making claims upon us is a central feature.

Second Objection: Compassionate Conservation is Overly Sentimental

Even if we grant that Compassionate Conservationists aren’t committed to a kind of rule worship, still there may remain apprehension over the role that is envisioned for compassion in moral deliberation. Emotions are “uninformed and il-directed,” write Hayward et al. (2019); thus, their presence will tend to obstruct one’s perception of the relevant facts and impede on one’s ability to make rational choices (Griffin et al., 2020). In the context of conservation, the worry is that an approach in which emotions are allowed to enter into decision-making would be able to “justify... implementing arbitrary, ineffective strategies [simply] because it makes us feel good” (Callen et al., 2020, p. 8). For these reasons, it is held that compassion has no place informing or directing conservation practice.

But this is an antiquated view, write Batavia et al. (2021): a vestige “of a gendered, binary mode of thinking that disparages emotion as the antithesis of reason” (1381). If we move past the prejudices that underlie this conception of the emotions, we will see that they are not, as Nussbaum (2001) puts it, “unthinking energies that simply push the person around” (25), but instead “involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object’s salience or importance; in that sense, they always involve appraisal or evaluation” (23). According to this competing account, emotions, far from blinding us to our reality, in fact can serve as “an indispensable source of moral understanding” (Batavia et al., 2021, 1383). It would allow us to say of a person who, for instance, does not respond with the appropriate compassion when confronted with the suffering of another, that they have failed to perceive or to properly estimate the significance of something of value (in this case their wellbeing).

That proponents of Compassionate Conservation have in mind this more substantial account of the emotions (as involving judgments of value) is clear when we consider that they take the disposition to attend with compassion to be a mark of the virtuous agent. In other words, they all seem to agree that this emotion can function as an essential aid to moral deliberation. Which, of course, is not to say that compassion

always necessarily leads us to an accurate appraisal of a situation. As Coghlan and Cardilini (2022) remind us, “compassion (and many other responses) can sometimes distort decisions” (9). Being able to tell the difference depends on an understanding of this emotion and how it manifests itself in the perfectly virtuous person. In turn, having this theoretical understanding of compassion is important not only because it can assist one in training the emotion, learning how to properly calibrate it to the situation at hand, but also because it allows one to better appreciate the importance of cultivating a compassionate disposition for both being good and doing good. With all this in mind, I turn now to pronouncements made by conservationists on the topic of compassion in order to arrive at a working definition.

Let us start with Wallach et al. (2018), who provide us with two important components of compassion. First, they identify as its object “the capacity of others to experience both joy and pain” (1260). And second, in what appears to be a clarification of the tenet ‘first, do no harm,’ they claim that the compassionate person will “make efforts not to inflict intentional and unwarranted suffering” (1260). Notice how in their choice of wording—‘make efforts,’ ‘unwarranted’—they seem to be allowing for the variability of right action and thus, by extension, speaking against an interpretation of tenet ‘first, do no harm’ as an inviolable rule. Perhaps a better way of stating this then would be to say that in attending to another, the compassionate person will *desire* that good be done to them and that they not suffer more than is necessary.

In a later essay, Wallach et al. (2020), make a substantive addition to their working definition of compassion, writing that it “spurs one to recognize another as a person: as an intrinsically and uniquely valuable individual whose interests kindle one’s concern and respect” (6). Putting aside the thorny question of personhood, what I find important here is their further specification of the proper object of attention: not the fact of suffering per se, but also and more importantly the unique and irreplaceable individual to whom that suffering belongs. This is an important amendment because it implies that an apt appraisal of suffering (its significance) is contingent upon one’s ability to see it *from the perspective of the sufferer*. Thus, we could say that when attention is driven by compassion, it strives to understand the significance of the experience of another as they themselves understand it.

Lastly, Batavia et al. (2021) have argued that to “exercise compassion... is to suffer with others in a condition of mutual dependency and shared vulnerability” (1384). This characterization contributes to our working definition of compassion, first, by drawing our attention to the way that we experience it in our body—that is, as pain. And pain is integral to compassion because it is the physical manifestation of the belief that the sufferer’s prospects for happiness or flourishing have been seriously diminished and that the misfortune has come about through no fault of their own (Nussbaum, 1996, 30–33). In its absence, it would be appropriate to suspect that one really does not understand the significance of the harm.

The second important contribution by Batavia et al. (2021) is that they identify dependency and vulnerability as the two material conditions that make possible the kind of identification with another that is required for compassion. And though they do not make this connection themselves, it seems intuitive to go on to say that what, in the first place, *alerts us* to this background condition of ‘mutual dependency and shared vulnerability’ is the pain that one feels in response to another’s suffering. More

than just a mirroring of their subjective state, that pain makes evident our own fragility—reminds us of the ways in which we too have suffered in the past and how we all live subject to a similar precarity (Nussbaum, 1996, 33–35; Blum, 1994, 177–178).

This cursory review of the recent literature puts us in a better position to give a full account of what it means to attend with compassion. First, it emerges as a response to another's suffering, and involves the experience of pain. This pain is significant because it expresses the belief that the harm that the other has been subject to is serious rather than trivial, and because it alerts us to our mutual dependency and shared vulnerability. And second, it spurs an attempt to imagine oneself into the life of this separate individual. The imaginative effort must, in turn, be motivated by the right kind of desire—a morbid curiosity, for instance, would not do. Instead, if it is to qualify as compassionate, it is essential that it be driven by a concern for the good of the sufferer; this might entail a wish that the suffering be alleviated, or a wish that it hadn't ever happened (Blum, 1994, 179–181). This definition makes clear that far from presenting an obstacle to objectivity, compassion in fact is what opens us to the reality of a separate individual.

Third Objection: Compassionate Conservation is Indistinguishable in Practice from Traditional Conservation

Most recently, Bobier and Allen (2022) have argued that the approach of Compassionate Conservationists, despite being unique in that “motivated principally by compassion for individual animals,” nevertheless ends up with a decision-making process that not only “closely mirrors the decision-making process of dispassionate consequentialists,” but also “arrives at the same practical endpoint” (10). We see this most clearly, they go on to argue, when we compare how each approach handles cases in which “animals will be harmed no matter what policies the conservationist adopts” (Bobier & Allen, 2022). Either one can resolve such conflicts by appealing to a set of inflexible rules (like a prohibition on the intentional infliction of harm), or one can weigh the consequences of each course of action against the others. Given that Compassionate Conservation is coming at it from a virtue ethics framework—and given that virtue ethics eschews a strict obedience to rules—then it must be the latter. Indeed, if we look to the actual and ongoing debates, we will find it confirmed that the “disagreement between the two approaches is not really about the underlying ethics... but is instead more about the efficacy of various animal management practices at reducing harm” (11). Thus, when it comes to making decisions, Compassionate Conservationists revert back to the very same cost-benefit analysis used by Traditional Conservationists.

Though this objection may seem at least by comparison to be quite sophisticated, I will show that it is actually confused on various levels. On a surface level, Bobier and Allen (2022) understate the extent to which both sides disagree on the ‘underlying ethics’ of conservation practice. So much is plain especially when we consider their respective solutions to conflicts between the wellbeing of wildlife individuals and the good biodiversity, with Compassionate Conservationists here often rejecting the consequentialist calculus that Traditional Conservationists employ to justify the sacrificing of individuals.

On a deeper level, Bobier and Allen (2022) fail to appreciate what it means for Compassionate Conservation to be grounded in virtue ethics—the extent to which it differs precisely because of this theoretical orientation. First, they seem to overlook that Compassionate Conservationists are not primarily interested in assembling a decision-making framework; rather, their prerogative is to compose a portrait of the person that conservationists should strive to be, a characterization that includes not “only their solutions to specifiable practical problems,” as Murdoch (1998) puts it, but “something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life” (80), as shown in the ways they imaginatively construe, respond to, and engage with the world.

An example of such a portrait is given to us by Batavia et al. (2020), when they write that “conservationists should be emotionally responsive to the ethical terrain they traverse, by both seeing and sitting with the moral residue of their work” (1119). ‘Moral residue’ here refers to those “moral requirements that are left unfulfilled” in situations where one is forced to decide between conflicting responsibilities (1116). Such situations are considered tragic insofar as whatever one does (including doing nothing) involve one in serious wrongdoing. Even so, it is still important that the “agent continues to recognize” the unfulfilled requirement “and feel it as something that ought to have been done” (1116). And when one fails specifically in one’s responsibilities to protect or to not cause harm to another animal, then the perfectly compassionate conservationist can be expected to experience a feeling of grief, appropriate in such circumstances because it signals the recognition that something of value has been lost.

To be ‘emotionally responsive’ in this way, Batavia et al. (2020) go on to argue, is worthwhile even if it does not have a noticeable impact on the policies one ends up endorsing or carrying out (1120). This should accord with our experience: it is already the case that our everyday moral judgments of people take into account not just their conduct, but also their feelings, their perceptions, and their responses (McShane, 2007, p. 174). Of a conservationist who is sensitive to the tragedy of being forced into a situation where some wrongdoing is inescapable, who is able to recognize in their decision the residue of an unfulfilled requirement, and who feels the pang of grief as a result, we may say of them, for instance, that they “retain their moral integrity” (Batavia et al., 2020, 1119), resisting the temptation to “remain emotionally aloof” so as to “dull the pain” (1120).

But more than just miss the point—that because grounded in virtue theory, Compassionate Conservation is primarily concerned with the question of who to be rather than what to do—I want to argue, second, that Bobier and Allen (2022) also *mischaracterize* the decision-making process of Compassionate Conservationists. That is, they seem to imply that when attempting to resolve a conflict of values, a Compassionate Conservationist has only the following two options available to them: either proceed by appealing to set of inflexible rules, or to measure the consequences of each possible action and compare them against each other. This is a false dichotomy. For a virtue ethicist, coming to know what one is required to do instead consists, first, of correctly *perceiving* the situation at hand. As discussed earlier, this entails discerning what the relevant variables *are*, assigning them the right significance, and then judging their practical relevance. And although a consideration of both rules and

consequences is likely also to play a role in the process by which the virtuous agent decides on a course of action, neither on its own can form the whole of deliberation. This is because, unlike the decision-making process of other approaches, virtue ethics does not assume that the relevant facts upon which a determination of right action is based can be known prior to the exercise of our moral faculties. Instead, determining what the facts are is *itself* a moral endeavor—one, moreover, intimately bound to the decision-making process. After all, as Murdoch (1998) would say, “I can only choose within the world I can see” (329).

Because they fail to account for the role of perception in the decision-making process of virtue ethics, Bobier and Allen (2022) also are not able to appreciate how the possession of a virtue like compassion can be practically influential in ways not easily replicated by other approaches. For instance, earlier we saw that a person who is compassionate is better equipped to recognize the tragedy that often attends a conflict of values. This recognition of tragedy, in turn, can directly influence action insofar as “it can motivate reparation,” writes Bryant (2023, 15). Whereas Traditional Conservationists, focused exclusively on right and wrong action, may “have difficulty seeing the need for reparation in cases in which someone has done what they ultimately should have done” (15), those who are sensitive to tragedy “can appreciate that sometimes, amends are called for even when the right action has been taken” (15). In a more indirect way, to recognize the existence of a tragic conflict of values, in Nussbaum’s (2000) words, “reinforces commitments to important moral values that should in general be observed” (1017). And this may be of more direct practical significance if, for instance, it then happens to motivate “conservationists to rearrange the world so they may avoid inescapable wrongdoing in the future” (Batavia et al., 2020, 1119). Taken together, what all these examples show is that Compassionate Conservationists, in asking others in the profession to shift their priorities away from a narrow minded focus on right action and towards a more general focus on character, is in fact offering an approach to decision-making that, if embraced, would have serious practical implications.

Fourth Objection: Compassion is Insufficient on Its Own

But even if one agrees that the emphasis on compassion offers an invaluable corrective to the impersonal calculations of utility prevalent in mainstream conservation science, still there may remain the worry that it may not always be enough, on its own, to guide one in situations where values conflict. Speaking of its limits, Santiago-Avila and Lynn (2020) write that “Although always indispensable, compassion (or any value) is not the only or most salient value for all times, places, and issues” (3). Specifically, “compassion becomes a problem when trying to precisely and equitably discern between competing claims, so as to arrive at a conclusion of when harm (to whom, and how much of it) could be considered ethical” (3). And so, what may instead be required is a momentary shift of attention, a stepping back from the imaginative, emotionally charged reconstruction of the life of a specific individual to the relatively impersonal consideration of several individuals (or groups of them) at once.

This broadened perspective brings with it a fresh set of concerns, expressed in a different vocabulary, suited for other purposes: we become for instance aware of ‘claims’ made upon us, ‘debts’ that are owed, and ‘bargains’ bought into (hence, the language of ‘rights’ and ‘contracts’). In essence, the shift is from the domain of personal morality (which deals with the unique responsibilities pertaining to specific individuals at a specific time and place), to the public domain of legal justice (which deals with the proper functioning of our political institutions, structures, and processes). The objective now is no longer the refining of one’s perception and the adoption of the right attitude, but the proper allocation of goods (‘distributive justice’), and the redressing of wrongs committed by one entity against another (‘corrective justice’).

But to distinguish personal morality from the public domain of social justice is not therefore to deny that compassion could support or in some way collaborate with legal justice. For an example of a supporting relationship, we can turn to Nussbaum (1996), who holds (1) that compassion entails the recognition that one “has possibilities and vulnerabilities similar to those of the sufferer” (35); (2) it includes the thought (perhaps unarticulated) that I could be confronted with the very same circumstances; and (3) that this is what causes us to care. Thus, we could say that compassion “provides imperfect citizens with an essential bridge from self-interest to just conduct” (57). In addition to being the impetus to legal justice, compassion can also guide us in its execution. Santiago-Avila and Lynn (2020) speak to this collaborative possibility, writing that compassion “allows for justice to be both more sensitive to inequalities and accountable to vulnerabilities” (6). In both cases, one is alerted to the fact that the existence of legal justice in society depends crucially on the continuous contributions of exemplary individuals.

Though in many ways complementary, there nevertheless exists a danger that thinking exclusively in the language of legal justice (centered on rights) can inadvertently thwart our ability to respond to another’s suffering with appropriate compassion. This is a problem because it then threatens to push apart our conception of justice, as it applies to our political institutions and processes, from the morally significant ways that we, as individuals, ordinarily respond to concrete instances of *actual* injustices. An arbitrary break is thus created between the personal and the public spheres of morality, and continuity and reciprocal influence between the two sides is discouraged or else denied. Cora Diamond (2001), building on the work of Simone Weil, elaborates on this danger, writing that what is at stake, specifically, is a notion of injustice which arises from an appreciation of “the significance of evil done to the vulnerable” as well as “the difference between such evil and other sorts of treatment to which... beings may be subjected.” Such an appreciation stands in tension with “the grammar of justice, if it is tied to rights” because “when genuine issues of justice and injustice are framed in terms of rights, they are thereby distorted and trivialized” (120). To understand why this is, we must remember that the language of rights

comes down to us from the Romans; rights in the original sense were... rights to property—and property centrally in slaves... It is eminently suitable for complaints that I am getting less, for example, than I am entitled to for some-

thing I want to sell, but not for the expression of outraged hurt when real evil is done to a person (Diamond, 2001, 120).

Of course, this does not mean that the language of rights is therefore useless in the pursuit of justice. The point here is rather that injustice is not always reducible *solely* to the violation of rights; it is often more centrally about, in Diamond's words, the horror we feel "in the face of the relentless exercise of human power" over a vulnerable being (2001, 120). And so, what must be allowed to enter into our concept of injustice is, first, the recognition of the evil inflicted on a vulnerable being and, second, a personal response (horror, indignation, etc.) that is congruous with that recognition. Lacking these, it might be said that one does not entirely understand what makes something the injustice that it is. Though we may be perfectly able to go on speaking of rights and claims and contracts, we have nevertheless lost from view the reality of the individual to whom these concepts purport to apply. We saw earlier why it is crucial for compassion to both support and collaborate with the process by which rights are won and protected (what I called legal justice); what I now want to say is that, for the very same reasons, our defense of rights must be informed by a recognition of the evils of injustice. Compassion thus ought to serve as a foundation for action not only in the personal domain of morality, but also in the public sphere of politics.

Compassionate Conservation in Practice: The Case of Predator Free New Zealand

So far I have argued that Compassionate Conservation should be taken as a substantive position with serious implications for the profession. What now remains to be done is to *demonstrate* that this is so. The case study I rely on for this task is that of Predator Free New Zealand (PFNZ): an ongoing campaign by the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DoC) that aims to entirely eradicate invasive rats, possums, and stoats by the year 2050 in order to safeguard the island's increasingly threatened biodiversity.² My aim, specifically, will be to show that Compassionate Conservation can offer a meaningful critique, not of the policy itself, but rather of the character of the conservation being practiced.

It should first be acknowledged that New Zealand conservationists are faced with a difficult predicament insofar as they must choose between the preservation of biodiversity and the minimization of animal suffering. Because there isn't yet a viable solution that perfectly addresses both concerns, no matter what one does, something of value must be sacrificed.³ Such a situation is what we earlier called a tragic conflict of values. However, a recognition of the tragedy of this situation isn't typically reflected in governmental policy or even in mainstream conservation practice. For

² New Zealand ranks highest of any country in its proportion of threatened species (Bradshaw et al., 2010, 8); an estimated 35% are at risk or threatened with extinction (Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ, 2019, 17), which includes 74% of terrestrial bird species, and 94% of reptile species (Stats NZ Tauranga Aotearoa, 2021).

³ As usual, habitat loss is also massive driver of New Zealand's biodiversity crisis (Linklater & Steer, 2018). However, for the sake of simplicity, I will just assume here that the choice is between predator control and the loss of biodiversity.

instance, the preferred method of predator extermination has so far been the ground and areal deployment of the poison 1080, known for intensity and duration of the suffering that it produces.⁴ Despite this, a 2012 study that reviewed the publications put out by both the DoC and the National Possum Control Agencies found that both had “no relevant material” addressing the risk of “inhumane suffering” from 1080 poisoning. They concluded that the “ethical issue of humaneness and animal welfare aspects of 1080 were essentially ignored” (Green & Rohan, 2012, p. 199).

At this point, a Compassionate Conservationist, even if they happened to support the general outlines of PFNZ, likely would be alarmed by this failure to account for the plurality of relevant concerns as well as the tragic nature of the conflict. Does it not signal a defect in one’s ability to perceive and to adequately respond to the relevant features of one’s circumstances? To understand what is at root of the blindness to the suffering of predators, it helps to attend closely to the way they are discussed and represented. Potts (2009), writing specifically on the attitudes of New Zealanders towards possums, reports that are often spoken of as mounting an ‘invasion,’ and as ‘attacking,’ ‘preying on,’ and “destroying’ native wildlife, all of which seems to “convey that these animals infiltrated New Zealand independently, willfully, and maliciously.” This, however, is an absurd notion given that possums were “forcibly removed from their native land and brought to a different country to establish a fur industry” (21). What these New Zealanders thus fail to see is that possums “are as much victims of human colonization and exploitation as the native animals of Aotearoa” (18).

This irrational resentment of predators gives us reason to suspect that the inability to properly respond to their plight, their suffering, may in fact be a distortion in perception caused by an absence of compassion. We find further evidence of this in the involvement of children in ‘pest’ eradication (as well as the particular form their participation takes). How predators are represented in these contexts I think is especially pertinent because, in addressing children, one cannot help but be didactical. Thus, it would not be out of place to ask ourselves of the following examples: What is the lesson that is here being taught?

Consider the image below, taken from a pamphlet put out by the Possum Control Agencies, which provides parents with “suggestions” on how to properly educate their children about the “possum problem” (Fig. 1).

The image actually appears twice. First, alongside text which reads: “CUTE AND CUDDLY? NO!” And second, accompanied by the menacing threat: “THE POSSUM BUSTERS ARE COMING.” Presumably, the idea is that when a child has overcome their natural impulse towards sentimentality and instead arms themselves with the ‘facts,’ they take up the mantle of ‘possum buster,’ fighting to vanquish the enemy. And now note how the ‘enemy’ is depicted in this image: hiding behind the foliage like a coward, like someone who knows their own guilt; nails and teeth pointed, long as knives; eyebrows curved like that of a cartoon villain. And because their gaze is directed upward at what I can’t imagine being anything else than an unwitting hiker simply walking along a path, the possum in this way makes clear that it is them who

⁴ The effects of poisoning last 4 to 12 h and include “vomiting, involuntary hyper-extension of the limbs, convulsions, and finally cardiac and respiratory failure” (Gupta, 2011, p. 705).



Fig. 1 The Possum Busters are Coming (National Pest Control Agencies, 2015)

has initiated the adversarial relationship with humanity writ large. Of course, in this representation the clear apprehension of the possum other is distorted by the projection onto them of vice and depravity. What is then obscured is the rather obvious fact that such malicious intent couldn't possibly apply to a creature without moral agency. And so, into this pamphlet one could read a failure of compassion to properly deploy.

What I want to draw our attention to next concerns the flippant manner in which predators are often killed and their bodies treated after their death. Especially as organized by elementary schools, one sees organized culls take on the character of a game, or a competition; sometimes the lifeless bodies have themselves become props, as with the infamous 'poss toss,' where kids holding possums by the tail vie to launch them as far as they can. Perhaps most unsettling of all is the 'best-dressed possum' contest held routinely in rural schools. The image below was taken in 2017 and is from the Uriti School (Fig. 2).

The Principal, Pauline Sutton, who was asked to comment on the contest had this to say: "There was an amazing crowd and it was lots of fun. Animals aren't the only species who are dressed up after they die. We do it to humans too" (Smith, 2012). Which is a perplexing comparison given that human dead are kept clothed because, in life, we associate an ability to dress oneself (and dress oneself well) with dignity. But possums, of course, do not dress themselves *or* their dead. What this flimsy justification serves to obscure is that the only conceivable reason such a contest can bring about "lots of fun" is because it is premised on a joke played at the possum's expense—creating comedy through their debasement and setting us up, in contrast, as superior.



Fig. 2 Two Possums Dressed in Their Finery (O' Connor, 2017)

On a more fundamental level, the contest might function as punishment through public humiliation. To see what I mean it would help to think of the preceding two images in juxtaposition to each other (the possum imagined as outlaw alongside the lip-sticked, dressed up corpse). One could see the latter image as building—and depending for its coherence—on the perceptual distortions that were created by the former. After all, disgracing the dead in this way is only justifiable if we first imagine them as ‘enemy.’

However, this second image also has the potential to be interpreted as a rebuke of the first, that is, working to disrupt the fantasy of possum wrongdoing and human retaliation. Notice how the dressed-up possum on the right—held in focus against a blurred background—is looking straight into our eyes, head level with the camera. Through the makeup and absurd ornamentation, we cannot help but recognize the face of another: a face that holds us captive, interrogates us. We are reminded, perhaps, that this possum lived without fault, desired only what was good for her. We see that her death is a tragedy, that the world would have been better (all things equal) with her life still in it. But this dawning awareness of her as a storied individual, as having had a life of importance to herself and doubtless to others, cannot be reconciled with a child’s sloppy attempt to paint her lips and nails red, with the crown of flowers around her head, the handbag and dress clinging to her body stiff with rigor mortis. It is difficult to hold together in one’s mind these two aspects at once. How different now this image is from the first, where the possum is merely object to be looked at, seen only through the prism of human prejudice.

When we refine our perception in this way, an injustice comes into view. It is not reducible to ‘wrong’ action, nor to the violation of rights, but is nevertheless implicit

in the way these animals are construed in the human imagination: as either the butt of our jokes, as props in our games, or else shrouded in fantasy. Whatever the case may be, the injustice inevitably takes form as the relentless exercise of power over a vulnerable and defenseless being. Not grasping their reality and independence, we believe them empty vessels to be filled with human meaning. Such displays of dominance, especially when children are drawn into it, undoubtedly serve a didactical function as well: hardening one against the recognition of the evil that is done, and against responses such as compassion which would otherwise be appropriate. I argue that insofar as this mode of predator representation is characteristic of PFNZ, then those conservationists who endorse and carry it out are complicit in the mass inculcation of callousness.

To clarify, none of this is to say that the ideally compassionate person will always oppose the killing of invasive species as a means of preserving biodiversity. On the contrary, it would be the height of naivety to believe, especially in the context of conservation, that harm and death could be altogether avoided. That being said, if the ideally compassionate person does find that it is required of them to act in a way that we would not typically call compassionate, in those circumstances we could expect them to be, in Hursthouse's words, "haunted by sorrow" and unable to "emerge with [their] life unmarred" (1999, 75). Batavia et al. (2021) puts it this way: "if cases arise where it appears impossible to uphold this commitment [to nonviolent coexistence], harm should not be inflicted with a hardened sense of inevitability, but with grief and a due sense of humility that acknowledges some amount of moral failure has occurred" (1386). Now think of how little this describes the proponents of PFNZ. In their attitudes towards killing, we saw that there was no reckoning with its tragic element, no regret over how events played out, no sense of being 'marred' by the act they felt was required of them.

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