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What Is an Animal Companion? Revisiting the Barnbaum-Varner Definition

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Abstract. Many animal ethicists have shifted from using the term “pet” to the term “animal companion,” but what exactly is an animal companion? Arguably, the most comprehensive description of what an animal companion is comes from Gary Varner, who builds upon the work of Deborah Barnbaum. This article examines what I call the Barnbaum-Varner definition of an animal companion. I suggest that while the definition mostly captures what we think of when we think of an animal companion, there are potential philosophical issues that may impede constructive use of this definition. A revised version of the Barnbaum-Varner definition is developed to avoid these issues.

Key Words: Deborah Barnbaum, Gary Varner, animal companion, pet, definition, caregivers, irreplaceable

In this article, I present what I call the Barnbaum-Varner definition of an animal companion. The Barnbaum-Varner definition of an animal companion stipulates that an animal companion is a “pet” who meets certain criteria (Barnbaum, 1998; Varner, 2002, 2017). The definition can be summarized as follows.

To be a “pet”:

1. The animal’s caretaker must feel affection for her.
2. The animal must lead a very different life from her caretaker.
3. The animal lives in an area significantly under the caretaker’s control.
4. The animal depends on the caretaker to have needs met.

To be an animal companion:

5. The “pet” must have significant social interaction with the caretaker.
6. The “pet” would voluntarily choose to stay with the caretaker, in part for the sake of the companionship.¹

While this definition mostly captures what we mean when using this term, it suffers from potential philosophical difficulties that make it unclear how useful the definition is in practice. By replacing part of the Barnbaum-Varner definition with an alternative criterion and rephrasing a separate criterion, we can avoid the philosophical difficulties identified while making practical use of the definition of an animal companion. More specifically, I suggest shifting away from a focus on caregivers meeting needs (Criterion 4) toward a focus on caregivers determining how needs will be met. Second, the criterion that an animal companion is a “pet” who would voluntarily stay with her caretaker (Criterion 6) should be replaced with the criterion that an animal companion is a “pet” whose caretaker views them as irreplaceable.

To begin, it is important to note that the Barnbaum-Varner definition of an animal companion is not a shift away from or a replacement for the term “pet.” Rather, the Barnbaum-Varner definition differentiates “pets” and animal companions as different groups of domesticated animals, with animal companions being a subset of “pets.” Why bother differentiating between “pets” and animal companions? The main reason for differentiating between these two groups is that the term “animal companion” better tracks the values and beliefs that animal companion caregivers themselves have. As I go on to argue, one of the primary differences between animal companion caregivers and “pet owners” is that animal companion caregivers have an elevated level of respect for their animal companions and view their companions as individuals who are unique and irreplaceable. Another important reason to differentiate between these terms is that the term “pet” has certain negative connotations that animal companion avoids. As Christine Overall (2017) suggests:

To call an animal a “pet” simultaneously expresses both fondness and condescension. It suggests a hierarchical relationship of a particularly insidious kind, in which the animal so labelled is both singled out for special favor and also expected to be submissive and obsequious. (p. xix)

Differentiating between “pets” and animal companions can help to avoid these issues. Lastly, animal ethicists have been making use of the term animal companion more frequently in recent years. However, relatively few have taken the time to provide a thorough definition of the term.

The article will proceed as follows. First, I will focus on what it means to be a “pet.” After surveying some initial potential definitions, Deborah Barnbaum’s definition of “pet” will be introduced to examine what criteria an animal must meet to be considered a “pet,” which animals might be (or might not be) considered “pets” according to this definition, and whether this definition of “pet” is intuitive. After this, a minor ambiguity in the definition of “pet” will be highlighted before a suggestion is offered to resolve that ambiguity. Attention will then be given to which additional criteria a “pet” must meet to be considered an animal companion. Finally, it will be argued that one of the criteria a “pet” must meet to be considered an animal companion raises certain philosophical difficulties that make it unclear how useful the term will be. An alternative to the problematic criterion will be offered.

WHAT IS A “PET”?

As a starting point, Overall (2017, p. xvii) suggests that we could define “pet” “as an animal whom meat-eating human beings would, for moral reasons (and other things being equal, that is, absent extreme conditions of famine), regard as unthinkable to eat.” As Overall correctly notes, this definition is quickly complicated by differences in cultures. In Western society, it is virtually unfathomable to consider eating cats or dogs, but in other societies, cats and dogs are considered edible. Similarly, while Americans regularly eat meat from cows, such consumption would be taboo in other countries, such as India. In addition to cultural dependence on how an animal is viewed, it is also worth noting that this definition simply picks out the wrong thing. In societies where it would be unimaginable to eat a cow, it is not the case that cows are therefore considered “pets.”

Overall (2017) suggests that what is at the heart of this definition is the notion that “pets” are commonly considered part of the family and that we find it unfathomable to consider eating our family members. More generally, “pets” are animals who live with us and share our lives, even if we don’t consider them family. Notice that defining “pet” in terms of familial relations or shared dwelling and interaction is also insufficient to capture what we mean by this term. First, if we define “pet” as an animal who is part of our family, then our spouses, children, grandparents, and other relatives might also be considered “pets.” A simple adjustment to the term “pets” is that they are *nonhuman* animals who are part of a family. However, the notion that “pets” are part of the family is a contentious idea and not one that is clearly representative of how many individuals see their “pets.” Second, if we define “pet” in terms of an animal who shares our living space and our life, then we might include certain animals who are not “pets,” such as working animals, or exclude certain animals who are “pets,” such as dogs who live outdoors.

In discussing whether Tamagotchis count as “pets,” Barnbaum (1998) argues that to count as a “pet,” an animal must meet the following four criteria:

1. The animal’s caretaker must feel affection for her.
2. The animal must lead a very different life from her caretaker.
3. The animal lives in an area significantly under the caretaker’s control.
4. The animal depends on the caretaker to have needs met.

On this view, a Tamagotchi is not a “pet” because a Tamagotchi does not have needs in the relevant sense. According to Barnbaum (1998), a Tamagotchi has no interest in its continued existence and hence no morally relevant needs. Even if they did, we could stipulate that because a Tamagotchi is not an animal, it cannot be a “pet.” Aside from excluding Tamagotchis as “pets,” what is included and excluded by this definition from Barnbaum? Further, does this definition accurately capture what we tend to think of when we think of a “pet”?

In Western society, cats and dogs are the most common animals considered to be “pets.” However, there are a wide range of animals commonly considered “pets” that are not cats or dogs. Among those animals commonly considered “pets,” there are reptiles, birds, fish, rodents, weasels (such as ferrets), and more. Similarly, it is commonly under-

stood that things like rocks, computers, and other humans are not “pets.” So, we want our definition to include those entities we commonly think of as “pets” while excluding those we commonly think are not. It is worth noting that simply because some individual animal is a member of a species whose members can potentially be a “pet” does not imply that all animals of that species are in fact “pets.” Consider, for example, dogs. Dogs are commonly considered animals who make great “pets” and are often sought for their companionship. However, not all dogs are “pets.” Some dogs do not have human caretakers. Those dogs without human caretakers are often labeled as strays. Strays are not “pets” in the relevant sense, even though dogs in general are great candidates for being “pets.” We also want our definition to track this relevant point. Using the Barnbaum (1998) definition of “pet,” strays would not be considered “pets” because they fail to meet several of the criteria. Strays do not have a caretaker who feels affection for them. Strays do not live in an area under a caretaker’s control. Finally, strays do not rely on a caretaker to have their needs met. Thus, our definition accurately categorizes strays as “nonpets.”

Animals considered “pests” are another human categorization of animals that our definition should exclude. So called “pests” often dwell in the same domicile as humans and lead very different lives than humans, but since they lack a caretaker who feels affection for them and do not depend on a caretaker to meet their needs, they are not considered “pets.” Similarly, animals who live with humans because they are interesting or useful, but for whom the caretaker feels no affection, such as a dog being used solely as surveillance, horses used for manual labor, or an insect kept because she is thought to be valuable, unique, or interesting—are not considered “pets.” Notice, however, that some animals used for labor might be considered “pets” according to this definition. Suppose, for instance, that a dog is tasked with assisting someone with a disability by being a seeing-eye dog. It may still be the case that this animal is considered a “pet” if the relevant criteria are met.

Other things excluded, according to this definition, are inanimate objects and other humans. Inanimate objects are ruled out as being “pets” since inanimate objects do not lead a (very different) life nor do they depend on a caretaker for their needs. Additionally, as we have defined the term, a “pet” must be an animal, which would be a further reason to exclude inanimate objects as being potential “pets.” Humans, on the other hand, are animals but are ruled out as being considered “pets” because while the course of each human life is different, the lives of other humans are not so very different from each other in the same way that the lives of humans and dogs are so very different from each other. Thus, our definition of “pet” excludes strays, so-called “pests,” some animals used for labor, animals kept solely because they are thought to be interesting or valuable, inanimate objects, and humans.

Before moving forward, it is important to look at a potential issue with one of the Barnbaum (1998) criteria. Criterion 4 holds that to be a “pet” an animal must depend on the caretaker to have her needs met. It is worth mentioning a potential ambiguity in this criterion to resolve it. One might think that there is a difference between relying on someone to meet your needs and relying on someone to determine how your needs are

met.² Suppose I have a cat whom I let outside to hunt for her food. This might plausibly be thought of as a case in which a caretaker determines how needs are met but not a case in which the caretaker meets the needs of the cat. Likewise, if I leave on vacation and hire a dog sitter who regularly feeds my dog, this might be seen as an instance of determining how my dog's needs are met even though I am not directly meeting my dog's needs. It might be objected here that both examples are cases in which the animal depends on you to meet her needs. After all, she can't let herself outside to hunt nor can she hire a sitter to provide food. However, there are other cases in which this difference becomes potentially more salient. One of the needs that any animal companion has is a need to exercise. As a caregiver, you cannot meet this need for your "pet"—they must do it for themselves. However, you can determine how that need will be met. For example, you might determine that providing plentiful time outdoors is sufficient to meet the exercise needs of your dog. In this case, much like the case of letting a cat outdoors to hunt or hiring a sitter to provide food, you determine how the needs of an animal will be met, but you do not meet those needs yourself. Given this, we should adjust Criterion 4 from "the animal depends on the caretakers to have needs met" to "the animal depends on the caretaker to determine how needs will be met."

WHAT IS AN ANIMAL COMPANION?

To be a "pet," an animal must meet the following criteria:

1. The animal's caretaker must feel affection for her.
2. The animal must lead a very different life from her caretaker.
3. The animal lives in an area significantly under the caretaker's control.
4. The animal's caretaker determines how the animal's needs will be met.

Gary Varner (2002, 2017) argues that to be an animal companion, you must be a "pet" who meets two further criteria. Those two criteria are:

5. The "pet" must have significant social interaction with the caretaker.
6. The "pet" would voluntarily choose to stay with the caretaker, in part for the sake of companionship.

Much like the definition of "pet," we want to know which animals might be included or excluded according to this definition and whether this definition captures an intuitive sense of the term "animal companion."

Criterion 5 further reinforces the idea that things like inanimate objects are not the proper objects of animal companionship because inanimate objects do not engage socially with caretakers. However, Criterion 5 is further reaching than that. This criterion implies that beings like plants, fish, reptiles, insects, and arachnids might not be suitable candidates for animal companions. Plants appear to be clearly ruled out by Criterion 5, as plants cannot engage in social interaction with humans. It is less clear, however, that fish, reptiles, insects, and arachnids cannot engage in social interaction with humans. Part of whether this is true, I suspect, depends on what we consider to be significant social

interactions. Social interactions include actions like accommodating others, competing, and communicating. It is not implausible to think that some of the animals listed above, such as fish and reptiles, could communicate (nonverbally) with caretakers. Even if we accept this, does such interaction count as significant interaction, in the relevant sense? Whatever counts as significant here, it must be the case that some nonhuman animal could engage in significant social interactions or else this definition would leave empty the set containing animal companions. While it is not entirely clear whether some animals can engage in significant social interactions, this should not cast doubt on the idea that some animals do in fact engage in significant social interactions with their human caretakers. Those of us with an animal companion in our home know this all too well. For example, my dogs accommodate me when I am not feeling well and give me extra time to let them outside. They communicate that they want a snack by standing, unwavering, by the refrigerator. They tell me they need to use the bathroom by pacing at the back door. The many hours we spend playing fetch and tug also count as significant social interactions.

The next criterion, Criterion 6, rules out as animal companions those animals who would either not voluntarily choose to stay in the relationship with the caretaker or those who would choose to voluntarily stay but not because of companionship. Examples of the former might include animals who are abused, while examples of the latter might include animals like seeing-eye dogs. Importantly, as Overall (2017) notes, Criterion 6 incorporates a certain amount of agency on behalf of animal companions. One might be motivated to understand animal companions in this way because it recognizes that animal companions are individuals who can make decisions for themselves when given the chance. However, this aspect of the definition also has some drawbacks that complicate its practical usefulness.

First, many animal companions belong to abusive or neglectful homes. So, it is not clear how accurate this definition is if many animal companions would choose to leave their caretaker but cannot. However, one might think that an animal companion's inability to leave an abusive or neglectful relationship is a different matter than whether that animal companion would choose to live with a human for companionship. In other words, animal companions who want to leave a relationship but cannot are not animal companions. Further, it is, at best, unclear that such animals even count as "pets." To be a "pet," we have said that an animal must have a caretaker who feels affection for her. However, if an animal is abused or neglected that is good reason to think that whoever is tasked with caring for this animal does not feel affection toward her. Perhaps in some rare cases this is untrue. For instance, suppose an elderly couple feels great affection for their dog but neglects her because they are incapable of providing for her. In this case, neglect is not necessarily indicative of lack of affection. However, here again, we see that an animal in this situation does not meet the criterion of being a "pet" because they are not having their needs met. Perhaps such animals are better classified as strays—domesticated animals who lack a caretaker.

Another problem with the definition offered by Varner (2002, 2017) is that an animal companion is defined in part by whether the animal would voluntarily choose to stay with

the human caretaker. Qualifying that an animal companion must voluntarily choose to stay with a caretaker poses several issues. One issue is that some animal companions may be incapable of making such decisions. For instance, suppose I keep several tropical fish as “pets.” Can these animals voluntarily choose to stay with me? What would it mean for a fish to volunteer to stay in the care of a human? How might we illustrate that a fish has voluntarily decided to stay under the care of a human? If fish cannot voluntarily choose to stay with humans, what does this mean for the fish we keep in our homes? One response is that fish cannot engage in significant social interactions. So fish are “pets” but cannot be animal companions. Since being a “pet” does not require voluntarily choosing to stay in the relationship, it does not matter if fish cannot voluntarily choose.

In my opinion, this response is correct insofar as it points out that fish are probably better candidates for being a “pet” than they are for being an animal companion. However, the response largely misses the point, which is that it is unclear what it means to voluntarily choose in this context and whether “pets” can choose in this way. Part of the issue here is about what is required to have the capacity to make such a decision. Would a dog in an abusive relationship voluntarily choose to stop being in that relationship if they knew the alternative was the pound and eventual euthanasia? It is unclear how well informed an animal must be to make such a choice. Alternatively, to what degree might animal companions be affected by adaptive preferences such that they would volunteer to stay in dangerous situations? Given the limited experiential repertoire of many “pets,” it is unlikely that they understand what a real alternative to their situation would mean for them. A related issue is whether voluntary action requires agency. If we think that an entity must have agency (or be an agent) to render its actions voluntary in the relevant sense, and we further think that nonhuman animals lack agency, then the set containing animal companions will be empty. Moreover, since there are different ways of understanding what it means to be an agent or possess agency, we will need to specify the kind of agency that is relevant to engaging in voluntary actions. Given these potential issues, one might wonder whether requiring voluntary action is too high a standard to impose on many animals.

Rather than focusing on voluntary action, whether animals are agents, or the epistemic issues related with this criterion, we could avoid the issue entirely by replacing Criterion 6 with the following:

7. The “pet” is considered unique and irreplaceable by the caretaker.³

Criterion 7 is meant to reflect the notion that an animal companion, like a family member or friend, is an individual who could not simply be replaced by a different individual. In a sense, all animal companions are replaceable. Should one’s dog die, they can simply adopt another.

However, this is not the notion of replaceability I have in mind. On this topic, Cynthia Townley (2017) says:

To be replaceable means that a substitute could do as well or nearly as well, in the same role. For example, I can replace my hairdresser; nothing inherent in the relationship

seems to rule that out. But talk of “replacing” a son or daughter, for example in a case of infant death, seems to miss the significance of that unique individual, and would offer little comfort to a grieving parent. Another child may well be born, but this is not a matter of replacement. (p. 23)

Similarly, upon the death of a family dog, one might get another dog. If one views this as merely replacing the family dog, then it may be more appropriate to say that this person treats the family dog as a “pet” and not an animal companion. Animal companions are considered such because of the intimate and meaningful relationship they have with their caregivers. Many animal companion caregivers mourn the loss of their animal companion in much the same way that they would mourn members of their family or their friends. Additionally, many animal companion caregivers will engage with their animal companions in a way that reflects a respect for individuality incorporated into this criterion. Animal companion caregivers will often do things for their animal companions because they have learned about their animal companion’s personality and unique disposition. Some dogs may require calming for regular grooming, some cats prefer not to be in snow, some dogs can’t stand to eat certain foods while being overjoyed to eat others, and so on. This criterion does a good job of reflecting the reality that animal companion caregivers view their animal companion as a unique individual.

After incorporating the above suggestions, our revised Barnbaum-Varner definition for an animal companion will look like the following:

To be a “pet”:

1. The animal’s caretaker must feel affection for her.
2. The animal must lead a very different life from her caretaker.
3. The animal lives in an area significantly under the caretaker’s control.
4. The animal’s caretaker determines how the animal’s needs will be met.

To be an animal companion:

5. The “pet” must have significant social interaction with the caretaker.
6. The “pet” is considered unique and irreplaceable by the caretaker.

This definition excludes from being an animal companion what we would normally expect: inanimate objects, plants, other humans, and animals who cannot engage in significant social interactions, such as insects. This definition includes as animal companions what we would normally expect: cats and dogs who have a caretaker that feels affection for them, determines how their needs are met, has significant social interactions with their caretaker, and are seen as unique and irreplaceable individuals by the caregiver. Additionally, because this definition does not rely on attributing agency or identifying voluntary choice on behalf of animals, it avoids not only the potential philosophical problems associated with agency and choice but is also of practical use since caregiver attitudes regarding animal companions are much easier to attribute and assess. For these reasons, the revised Barnbaum-Varner definition should be preferred over the original Barnbaum-Varner definition.

CONCLUSION

As the number of ethicists discussing our moral responsibilities to animal companions grows, the need for a theoretically consistent and practically useful definition of an animal companion will be even more important. The revised Barnbaum-Varner definition gets us partway toward this goal. Working toward this goal also requires addressing difficult questions, some of which were raised throughout this article. These include: How should we understand the ethical differences between “pets” and animal companions? What does it mean for a “pet” or animal companion whose caretaker no longer feels affection toward them? Which animals have the potential to engage in significant social interactions with caretakers? It is important to address these sorts of questions, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

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Notes

1. I have changed instances of “keeper” and “owner” to “caretaker” to reflect the principle that animals should not be considered property.
2. Thank you to Kathryn Lindeman for raising this point.
3. The concept that something is unique and irreplaceable in this sense is similar to the concept of Kantian dignity. On this Kant (1785/2012) says, “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity” (4:434–435). While Kant did not think this concept applied to animals, there is reason to think he is mistaken. For example, see Christine Korsgaard’s work on Kantian animal ethics. Thank you to Kathryn Lindeman for drawing this connection.

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