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What Does It Mean to Be a Pet?

The question of what it means to be a pet probably appears, at least on the surface, to be a rather naïve inquiry. However, when considering the array of modern-day virtual pets that many, particularly children, own nowadays, one might see how this question quickly brings rise to deeper, more pensive issues. The instinctual view that what constitutes a pet must be a living creature is no longer the case, if it ever was the case to begin with. Examining the works of Philip K. Dick (author of the novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), Dr. Ron Hornbaker (founder of the virtual pet website, foopets.com) and philosophers Aristotle and Rene Descartes, will not only clarify what it means to be a pet, but also provide sufficient justification for why humans appear to be the only species capable of owning a pet.

Oxford Dictionaries defines the word “pet” as “a domestic or tamed animal or bird kept for companionship or pleasure and treated with care and affection” (Oxford Dictionaries). The key word used in this definition is “animal” (we will assume “living animal”) and examine not only what it is that constitutes a living being, but also whether or not a living being is, as Oxford Dictionaries appears to proclaim, a necessary condition for pethood.

Dr. Ron Hornbaker, veterinarian and founder of the virtual pet company FooPets, believes that “the special bond between people and their pets can be recreated online” (FooPets). With this vision, he and his team of artists and engineers founded the website foopets.com and have since created one of the most realistic virtual pet adoption sites that exists on the web today.

Simulating reality, the health of a FooPet depends on regular feedings and care patterns, and a pet can become sad, sick, or even sent back to the (virtual) animal shelter if he or she is not cared for correctly. As an added realistic touch, FooPets enables its virtual pet owners to interact other virtual pet owners, and permits them to care for one other's pet, just as a neighbor might do. So if a virtual animal requires the same amount of care and provides the same companionship that a living animal does, it seems that a virtual animal is just as much of a pet as a living animal could be considered, and that the condition of being "living" is not a necessary for this type of relationship.

A second example of a non-living pet can be found in the novel by Philip Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. This fictional work envisions a post-apocalyptic, almost post-human world where nearly all animals have become extinct and replaced with human-made, electric animals. The few natural animals that still exist are sold and coveted as private, valuable possessions, but cared and tended for just as if they were the real things. People who cannot afford the price of live animals buy cheap electric animals, which are nearly undistinguishable from the real ones, and their artificiality is kept carefully concealed from neighbors. While artificial, these fake animals still serve as a way for surviving humans to express their humanity. In admitting his animal is a fraud, Rick Decker tells his neighbor, "It's a premium job. And I've put just as much time into caring for it as I did when it was real" (Dick 12).

Now that it has been illustrated how both living and non-living things can both be classified pets, let us now move onto the next mission of determining who is capable of being a "pet owner." Philosophers René Descartes and Aristotle have each spent considerable amounts of time distinguishing between what is living and non-living, and it is by their examinations on

this topic that we are able to determine why humans seem to be the only creatures capable of being “pet owners.”

For Aristotle, “All lifeless things are moved by something else” (Aristotle and Ackrill 233). Essentially, electric animals are non-living, and living entities are “ensouled.” By “ensouled” Aristotle believes that an entity possess the “faculties of nutrition, perception, thought and movement” (Aristotle and Ackrill 168). Now, if electric animals are “lifeless” and lack the basic criteria of what it means to be living, it is incomprehensible how such a being would be able to care for and nurture another being—no matter whether it is living or non-living. It takes little effort to accept that for one being to care for another, one would need, at minimum, the faculty of thought to consider what’s in the pet’s best interest, and the faculty of movement to be able to act on that thought.

For René Descartes, he believed that all non-living entities, and even living animals, lacked reason and the capacity to respond. He describes this reason as the inability to “use words or other signs, or put them together as we (humans) do in order to declare our thoughts to orders” (Descartes and Cress 32). Descartes goes even further and claims that, “not merely (do) beasts have less reason than men but that they have none at all” (Descartes and Cress 32). While the latter claim seems a bit harder to accept, it nevertheless expresses Descartes strong view that humans possess this unique quality of reason that no other entities seem to have. Without this reasoning ability, as “thought” and “movement” were found in the case with Aristotle, it is incomprehensible how such a being would be able to care for and nurture another being—whether it be living or non-living.

It is for these reasons above that the requirements of being a “pet” are not strictly limited to being an animal, but rather does not even have to be living. Additionally, it seems that through

the investigation of works by Aristotle and René Descartes, that we are able to conclude that being “human” is the necessary condition of being a “pet owner.” It may be possible to argue that if an android were to possess the qualities that Aristotle and Descartes seem to think only humans have, then it is probable that they would each determine that androids had the capacity own pets, too. However, because neither philosopher has ever been found to argue for specific criteria, which constitutes pets and pet owners, we are only able to form a good basis as to why they would accept the idea, rather than being able to decisively conclude which way they would side.

Works Cited

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