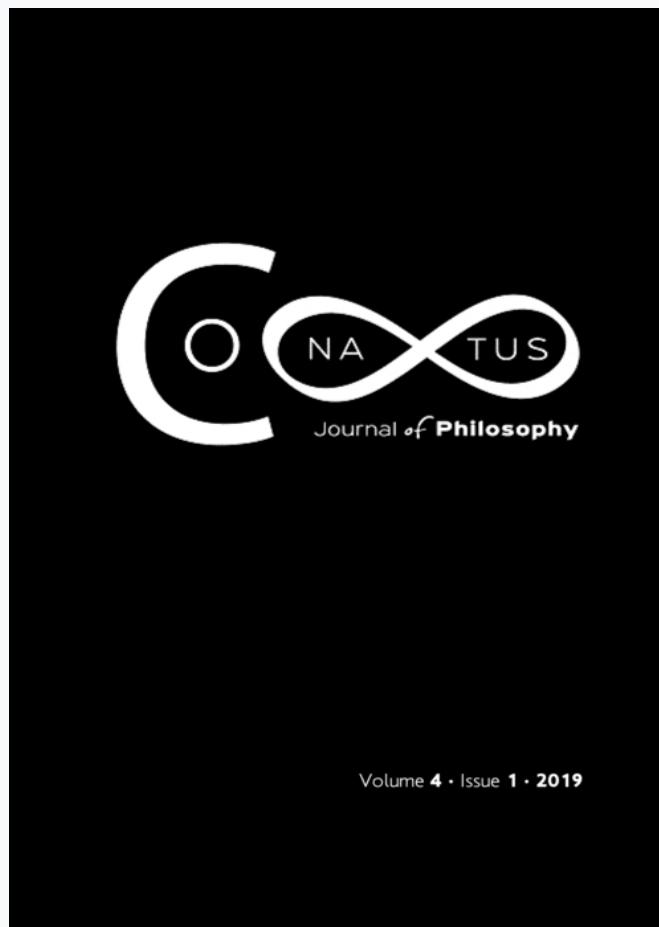


Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 4, No 1 (2019)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



Jessica Pierce. Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Dimitra Kountaki

doi: [10.12681/cjp.19577](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.19577)

Copyright © 2019, Dimitra Kountaki



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Kountaki, D. (2019). Jessica Pierce. Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 4(1), 137–140. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.19577>

book review

Jessica Pierce. *Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Dimitra Kountaki

University of Crete, Hellenic Republic

E-mail address: dimitrakoun@aol.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4212-4194>

In her book *Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets*, bioethicist Jessica Pierce attempts to explore a narrower field of Animal Ethics, the ethics of keeping pets, as the title indicates. There has not been much research in this field, although contemporary literature has dealt with certain issues within its context, such as the issue of euthanasia (Pierce's previous book, *The Last Walk*, is dealing with this issue).¹ The author states that her main aim is to lead the reader, by the time he reaches the last page of the book, to no longer be sure if the very practice of keeping pets is moral.² Although the author proposes the use of a kinder language for discussing about pet keeping, she uses the accepted language throughout her book.

The book consists of forty-eight chapters of short length, divided in four basic sections, each of which covers a facet of the practice of pet keeping. The first section is introductory and its main scope is to show that this region is morally rich, as there is a growing trend for the practice of keeping pets. This trend is primarily the result of "propaganda" from the side of pet industry. Pierce characterizes this trend as a tidal wave in which people along with animals are being carried upon and this may have unintended destructive

¹ Jessica Pierce, *The Last Walk: Reflections on Our Pets at the End of Their Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

² Jessica Pierce, *Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 217.

consequences.³ The second section consists of issues of everyday life with pets, like for example the sleeping habits of pets, zoonotic diseases, feeding issues and more. In this section Pierce adopts a loose style, even funny at times, which seems appropriate as most of these issues are trivial. However the author's discussion of these matters has some practical significance as she suggests ways of treatment that contribute to a harmonious coexistence of humans and pets within a household.

In the third section, the author moves on to more weighty issues which are mostly uncomfortable like for example the obscure role of shelters within the pet industry, the sexual abuse, the euthanasia, the commoditization of animals, the exotic animals being kept as pets, and more. In order to shed light on the darkest sides of human interaction with pets she engaged herself in a research from the inside. She made herself aware of the extent of bestiality, by becoming a member in a zoophile chat room. She even learned how to kill a pet by attending a two-day euthanasia-by-injection course for shelter workers. "If you thought that shelter euthanasia was always performed by a veterinarian, think again," she says.⁴ All the data and all the details the author provides show that reality is elegantly concealed under the veil of an ostensible benevolence. This section, in my opinion, is the most important one, as the data presented is shocking.

The fourth part seems more conclusive and under the weight of all that has been said up to that point, Pierce tries to reach a conclusion about the morality of owing pets. We should not overlook the fact that we expect at this point to read a well-reasoned conclusion. However, while each chapter of the book effortlessly leads to the realization that pet keeping is primarily an immoral act in itself, the author strives to "save" this practice. The problem is that Pierce is an animal lover who is really attached to her pets. As she states: "My own best argument for pet keeping is right behind me in my office."⁵ This statement used as an argument and enforced by her attachment to her pets makes her to turn her back to the logical conclusion of her own research. The consequence is a clear case of logical contradiction. Gary Francione calls this kind of contradiction a "moral schizophrenia:" "we may be said to suffer from a sort of 'moral schizophrenia' when it comes to our thinking about animals. We claim to regard animals as having morally significant interests, but we treat them in ways that belie our claims."⁶ Elsewhere he concludes: "We must keep in mind that if we took animal interests seriously,

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁶ Gary L. Francione, *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 22.

we would not be domesticating animals as ‘pets’...”⁷ The above mentioned contradiction is admitted by Pierce and is pretty much concentrated in the following phrase of hers: “The most obvious solution, which I mention time and again, is to opt out of the system altogether and not have pets or support any facet of the pet industry. But this is not a solution that the animal lovers among us will want to hear.”⁸ This statement can be seen either as the biggest weakness of the book, provided that the book is of any academic use, or as being a part of the basic virtue of the book which is the author’s proximity to the common feeling.

As a matter of fact though, the author’s main argument is totally fallacious. The fallacy in her syllogism is that we cannot set as a major premise of the argument the human desire to associate with other animals⁹ and conclude that this desire can adequately substantiate the practice of pet keeping, especially if pet keeping is such an immoral practice as the author constantly alludes throughout her book. Accepting such a syllogism as sufficient is the same as accepting the syllogism that the practice of rape is justified because it gives pleasure to the rapist and fulfills his needs. Under the weight of what Pierce reveals in her book, such an inference seems absolutely superficial. Moreover, pet keeping cannot be seen as the only way for humans to associate with other animals.

In addition, the author’s proximity to the common feeling, no matter how meritorious, cannot make up for the considerable distance between what the reader expects by reading the title of the book and what she finally takes by reading the whole book. If the reader seeks for a sufficient philosophical argument she will get really disappointed. The book proves to be mostly a mix of exposure and the author’s personal feelings. The author just relies on personal feelings of love toward her pets, and seeks solutions that animal lovers like her can easily welcome. She even provides a list of possible changes that would offer increased protections for the animals into the existing context of pet keeping. Indeed, these changes belong in the realm of possibility, as she says,¹⁰ but cannot serve as an adequate solution for the ills that she herself highlights, especially in the third section of her book. The moral conundrum remains.

Nevertheless, according to the author’s words her aim is just to make the reader review the morality of the practice of pet keeping.¹¹ We have to admit

⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸ Pierce, *Run, Spot, Run*, 175.

⁹ Ibid., 219.

¹⁰ Ibid., 212.

¹¹ Ibid., 217.

that this is actually achievable and this is the book's big win. In addition, we have to say that the book provides crucial and important information about weighty issues and its undeniable value lies also in the introduction of the subject matter in an admirably efficient way to the general public.

References

Francione, Gary L. *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.

Pierce, Jessica. *Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Pierce, Jessica. *The Last Walk: Reflections on Our Pets at the End of Their Lives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.