

Jessica Pierce

*Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets*

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How we treat other animals reveals something both about people themselves, and about the commercial institutions that structure people's desires and expectations. Jessica Pierce's book is concerned with both types of actor. It is a call to activism on behalf of the animals we bring into our homes as pets and companion animals.

*Run, Spot, Run* is laid out in a series of 48 short chapters, some as short as three or four pages. Pierce develops her position gradually, layer by layer, through discussions of her personal experiences as a pet owner, social science research into human interactions with pets, her encounters with other animal lovers, scientific research on animal behaviour, and descriptions of a vast pet industry. While the extensive bibliography contains many references to philosophical sources, the text itself does not focus on philosophical arguments for the moral standing of animals. Instead, we are led to see the relevance of ethical inquiry by looking at the problematic things people are doing to and with animals. The book raises pointed questions about the acceptability of owning pets, but does not conclude that ethical pet ownership is impossible. However, taking the book seriously forces the reader to understand just how difficult ethical ownership of pets can be. We should take the humorous title of the book seriously. In many cases, running may be Spot's best option.

The ethical problems with pet keeping arise in two different contexts. On the one hand, Pierce worries about the face-to-face interactions between pet owners and their pets. She doubts that merely loving animals is sufficient to guarantee appropriate care for one's pets. And what about those pet owners who clearly do not love their pets, but use them to work out their own neuroses? At the same time, Pierce is also interested in the broader context of a pet owning culture. Pet owning takes place in the context of a multi-billion dollar pet industry, with its own financial and marketing agendas. Is ethical pet ownership possible when it is enmeshed in this broader business context that does not necessarily prioritise the well being of the animals it commodifies? What would a 'life-cycle' or 'cradle-to-grave' analysis of the pet as commodity reveal about the ethics of pet ownership?

While Pierce affirms the value of close connections between humans and non-human animals and the potential empathy and compassion that may arise from those connections, she suggests that this justification for owning pets is overblown. Pierce notes that many pet owners have bought into an industry narrative about the joys and benefits of pet ownership uncritically, without asking themselves whether they are willing to bear the responsibilities involved in caring for animals. One survey she cites suggests that those who choose to own pets are often focused on the supposed benefits to themselves, while those who choose not to own pets are more focused on the needs of the animal. The imperative that we must try and understand the pets' point of view – and ask

how pet ownership benefits the individual animal – is foundational to the book's argument.

In the section 'Living with Spot', Pierce addresses a series of topics related to pet owners' motivations and everyday interactions with their pets. She is sceptical of the industry narrative that pets help to complete the 'family constellation' and cultivate empathy and responsibility in children. Many families are dysfunctional in various ways, and their pets often find themselves used as tools in intra-family struggles. In many cases, children are not prepared for the responsibility of taking care of a member of another species. Indeed, Pierce questions the ethics of putting an animal in the care of a human child.

Other topics in this section include critical discussions of behaviours that many pet owners may assume are normal and unproblematic, such as petting their animals or talking to them incessantly, dressing them up in 'cute' outfits, dealing with their 'poop', providing appropriate diets, or sharing a bed with pets. She also discusses the health risks of owning pets and the risks of injury from pets whose behaviour the owners, and their children, may not adequately understand.

While these topics challenge the assumption that pet owning is always positive for the humans involved, a layer of more serious issues emerges in the section 'Worrying about Spot'. Here the focus is not on the sometimes silly and often questionable choices of pet owners, but on the serious harms done to pets by individual owners and by the pet

industry itself. Topics include: the ethics of animal confinement, sexual abuse of animals, abandonment and neglect, the euthanasia industry, pet shelters, spaying and neutering, the sourcing of pet animals, and exotic pets.

Pierce paints a disturbing picture of widespread animal neglect and abuse, both physical and, especially, emotional. In our pet owning culture, pets are treated as commodities to be bought and sold at the convenience of often fickle human beings. Despite the rhetoric of animal love and care that is an intrinsic feature of the pet owning narrative, Pierce argues that too many people fail to take their pets seriously enough to consider their physical, social, and emotional needs. We like pets to be responsive to us and dependent on us, yet too often do not reciprocate with equal commitment. Our pets most often lead a life of confinement, boredom and stress. The shelters are full of abandoned animals and the systematic euthanising of healthy animals is routine. While the pet industry profits from the pet owning imperative that it encourages, most of its profits derive from commodities other than the animals themselves, and thus the wellbeing of the animals is often not a major business concern. Many animals suffer and die long before they reach a pet owner's home. A cradle-to-grave analysis of pet lives is ethically disheartening.

Pierce does not advocate for the complete dissolution of our pet owning culture. However, she does argue that very few animals are really suited to be pets from an ethical point of view. Dogs and cats rank highest on her list as species having a long history of

domestication. But she is sceptical about the rest. The more unlike human beings, the more likely that the animal's life will be one of misery and neglect.

Recognising that our pet owning culture is not going to disappear, Pierce's goal in this gently provocative book is to provide a guide to the abuses commonly inflicted on pets, while pointing to ways in which pet owners could take greater responsibility for pets in their care. More ethically responsible choices – from deciding which pet will best fit with one's own life, to how pets are fed and housed, to how their medical needs will be addressed – require us to acknowledge the subjectivity of animals. In addition, however, Pierce also suggests needed reforms of the pet industry itself that could help ameliorate the conditions in which pets are bought, sold and owned. This too is a task for pet owners and their activist advocates.

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