The Ethics of Declawing Cats

Steven R. Kraaijeveld
s.r.kraaijeveld@amsterdamumc.nl
Amsterdam University Medical Centers

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Abstract
Onychectomy involves the surgical amputation of a cat's claws. Tendonectomy entails surgically cutting tendons to prevent the extension and full use of a cat's claws. Both surgeries practically declaw cats and are not only painful but also associated with high complication rates. While feline declawing surgeries have been banned in various places around the world, they are still elective in many countries and U.S. states. This article provides an ethical analysis of declawing cats. It discusses the harms posed by feline declawing surgeries, like pain and complications, which are not offset by any benefits to cats. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, it also offers an additional and broader ethical argument against declawing, namely that removing cats' claws is unjust because it thwarts important capabilities for feline flourishing (e.g., play, bodily integrity, control over one's environment). It concludes that declawing cats for non-medical purposes is unethical and must be opposed.

Keywords: onychectomy; tendonectomy; declawing; ethics of declawing; human-animal relations; feline flourishing; feline capabilities

> "It is hard to protect a person you love from pain, because people often choose pain [...]. An animal will never choose pain; an animal can receive love far more easily."
> —Mary Gaitskill, *Lost Cat*

Introduction

Feline onychectomy, popularly known as declawing, is a procedure by which a cat's claws are surgically amputated. The term 'declawing' may be misleading, because a cat's claw cannot be removed without also removing sections of bone, so that the procedure is best described as a phalangectomy or the "excision of one or more of the phalanges of the [paw]" (Waite 2021). Declawing cats has been likened to removing a human finger at the first knuckle (Povich 2023).

While onychectomy may be medically indicated in rare cases (e.g., nailbed neoplasms), declawing "is not a medically necessary procedure for cats in most instances" (Suska et al. 2017). Onychectomy is often included among reviews of unnecessary or 'convenience' surgeries in cats and dogs, along with practices like caudectomy (tail docking), ventriculocordectomy (devocalization), and ear cropping (Mills, von Keyserlingk, & Niel 2016; Corr, Sandøe, & Palmer 2016).

The most common reasons for declawing are related to the effects of scratching, like the prevention of property destruction (Martell-Moran, Solano, & Townsend 2017). In one study, the most frequent rationale that people offered for having their cat declawed was "to avoid damage caused by the cat scratching household materials" (Yeon et al. 2001).

One proposed surgical alternative to onychectomy is tendonectomy, which involves cutting cats' tendons to prevent them from being able to stretch their claws and thus to render them unable to scratch. Tendonectomy is sometimes considered to be a 'safer' alternative to tendonectomy, but the procedure is associated with similarly high complication rates and has not been found to be less painful for cats than onychectomy (Cloutier et al. 2005). Since claws still grow even when cats are no longer able use them after tendonectomy, cats subsequently become entirely dependent on guardians for claw and nail care.

At the time of writing, declawing cats for non-medical reasons is outlawed in most European countries, the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Israel, and Brazil. Nevertheless, in most countries around the world, no legislation exists (for a complete overview, see PETA [2023]). Only two U.S. states—New York and Maryland—have successfully passed declawing bans, even if some cities, like San Fransisco, Los Angeles, Austin, and Denver, also have bans in place (Dean 2023). Proposed legislation in Michigan (H.B. 4883) would make it the third U.S. state to criminalize declawing (ALDF 2023). In Canada, declawing laws are decided at the provincial level, with all provinces except Ontario having banned declawing (Dean 2023).

Prominent associations and societies for nonhuman animal medicine and welfare, like the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA), The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA) strongly discourage onychectomy and only consider it acceptable as a last resort to prevent euthanasia, for example when it is medically necessary to remove cancerous nailbed tumors (HSUS 2023).

Even though declawing has been banned in many countries and at least two U.S. states, is actively opposed by prominent veterinary associations, and has been the subject of widely

circulated petitions[1] and proposed legislature (e.g., Waite 2021), there has been little discussion of the ethics of declawing practices in the academic literature to date.[2] This article fills that gap by offering a comprehensive examination of declawing cats from an ethical perspective.

The term 'declawing' is used in this article in a broad sense that includes both onychectomy and tendonectomy. Technically, only onychectomy involves declawing in the literal sense, as claws are not actually removed during tendonectomy. However, the ethical arguments in this article apply to both procedures to the extent that they are harmful to cats and leave them practically declawed—that is, in a state where the ability to exercise their claws has been purposefully eliminated. It is worth noting that associations like the AVMA also do not recommend tendonectomy, which, like onychectomy, is also illegal in many countries (Grier & Peterson 2005).

The article proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of the direct harms (like pain) that declawing poses to cats as reported in the relevant medical-scientific literature. Harms to nonhuman animals, as to human beings, may potentially be ethically acceptable if they are offset by significant benefits. From a utilitarian or medical-ethical perspective, for instance, one may accept some pain to cats if this ultimately serves their greater well-being. However, as will be become clear, declawing cats does not appear to offer any direct benefits. Ostensible benefits to cats seem to accrue only indirectly—that is, through benefits to human guardians. These benefits, however, carry little ethical weight and do not justify direct harms to cats. Human beings have moral duties to companion animals, like beneficence and non-maleficence (Cooke 2001; Lund and Forsberg 2009), which in any case seem to preclude accepting major harms to companion animals for the benefit of guardians.

Second, a broader ethical argument against feline declawing is developed, which is not dependent on the direct harms of surgery (e.g., pain and risks of complications). Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's work regarding capabilities for flourishing and justice, it is argued that having functioning claws is crucial for feline flourishing. To offer just one example here, removing cats' claws significantly undermines their bodily integrity because it leaves them unable to use an integral part of their anatomy. By framing declawing in terms of how it affects feline capabilities, a more extensive picture emerges of the ways in which it stands to harm cats. Differently put, beyond the direct harms of surgery, the state of no longer having functioning claws additionally and uniquely harms cats by thwarting their ability to be the kind of beings that they are. Declawing cats is unjust to the extent that it undermines feline capacities to flourish; opposing declawing is therefore a matter of justice. As Nussbaum puts it in *Justice for Animals*, our relationship with companion animals "remains defective, a work in progress at best, a type of relationship that would in many cases be regarded as morally heinous and legally actionable were the creature in question a human child" (2022, 195).

There are, of course, other approaches to animal ethics and the moral significance of respecting and promoting animal agency than Nussbaum's. Christine Korsgaard's Kantian account, according to which we ought to treat companion animals as ends in themselves rather than as mere means to serve our human ends (2012; 2020a; 2020b), provides another important perspective. Donna Haraway's reflections on the intertwined nature of human-animal lives, "bonded in significant otherness" (2006, 15), and on what our often-intimate intersubjectivity with other animals means for how we ought to treat companion species in view of complex 'naturecultures' (2008), also provides a valuable point of view. Finally, one

[1] See, for example, the petition "Keep Cats' Claws on Their Paws" by Alley Cat Allies: https://www.alleycat.org/take-action/ban-declawing-keep-cats-claws/

[2] An important exception is a discussion about performing convenience surgeries like tail docking, ear cropping, debarking, and declawing, by Sandra Corr, Peter Sandøe, and Clare Palmer (2016). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this work to my attention.

might have approached the matter of declawing cats by exploring the consequences of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's move away from moral to political theory, to explore what it means to consider cats as full members of human-animal mixed communities (Blattner, Donaldson, and Wilcox. 2020; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2013).

However, even though the potential relevance of these other views is occasionally suggested in what follows, the article primarily draws on Nussbaum's capabilities approach for two main reasons.[3] First, Nussbaum's approach clearly shows how declawing not only harms cats physically (i.e., through painful surgeries) but also in ways that are not immediately clear if one focuses only on pain as one might, for instance, from a strictly utilitarian or medical-ethical perspective. Second, given that a major aim of this article is to scrutinize the moral standing of the practice of declawing cats, it is sufficient to question the morality of the practice if it can be convincingly demonstrated that it is wrong according to at least one influential philosophical-ethical account. This is especially true given that there is no reason to think that any of the previously mentioned accounts would disagree with the analysis that declawing is harmful to cats (e.g., one would be hard-pressed, indeed, to argue that declawing cats is consistent with treating cats as ends-in-themselves). Given that this article is the first comprehensive attempt to provide a substantive ethical approach to feline declawing, its theoretical scope is necessarily limited.[4] Where there are additional moral reasons against declawing cats, the arguments in this article are only strengthened.

There have been calls within the field of animal ethics to take nonhuman animal perspectives more seriously (e.g., Meijer 2019; Meijer 2021). It is increasingly recognized that "animals are no longer creatures to simply think about: they have their own perspectives on life, and humans can in some instances communicate with them about that" (Meijer & Bovenkerk 2016, 49). Accordingly, the capabilities of nonhuman animals should not (merely) be measured by human standards; we must do better to understand their unique capabilities and forms of agency. Trying to understand declawing from the perspective of what it means for a cat to (no longer) have and to (no longer) be able to use their claws is a move in that direction.

It has also been argued that some moral questions about the relations between humans and other animals cannot be entirely covered by traditional animal ethics approaches and that, for some questions, we must examine the interests of species rather than those of individual animals (Bovenkerk 2016). By not merely examining the effects of declawing on individual cats, but by also considering larger concerns about species-level flourishing—which Nussbaum's account is particularly well-positioned to accomplish—the approach taken in this article aligns with wider calls to examine moral questions about nonhuman animals at the level of species.

The article ends with a discussion about the practical implications for different parties—guardians, veterinarians, and governments—potentially involved in feline welfare. The upshot of this discussion and the article's conclusion is that cats ought not to be declawed except in very limited cases when the procedure directly stands to improve their welfare. Feline declawing for non-medical purposes should be roundly opposed.

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[3] It should be noted that Nussbaum's approach has not been immune to criticism and may raise broader problems. For example, some have argued that Nussbaum's approach cannot do full justice to ecosystems and, in particular, faces difficulties with prey-predator relationships or the so-called problem of predation (e.g., Ilea 2008; Crescenzo 2012; Hailwood 2012; Wissenburg 2011; Cripps 2010). While recognizing these potential limitations, I cannot address them here. My focus is specifically on the relevance and value of Nussbaum's capabilities approach for the ethics of declawing cats; for which purpose, as I argue in this paper, it is both informative and well-suited.

[4] If the article invites others to consider declawing from different perspectives—including competing approaches to Nussbaum's—then this would make for an important contribution.

Direct Harms of Declawing Surgeries to Cats with No Benefits

It is well-documented and widely recognized that onychectomy is a painful surgical procedure that requires an extended period of analgesia and is associated with high complication rates (Jankowski et al. 1998; Curcio et al. 2006; Gaynor & Muir 2015; Martell-Moran, Solano, & Townsend 2017).[5]

A prospective study of 27 healthy cats found that limb function was still significantly reduced 12 days post-surgery, "suggesting that long-term analgesic treatment should be considered for cats undergoing onychectomy" (Romans et al. 2005, 89). It is worth noting that one cat was removed from this study "a few hours after surgery when it was considered to have severe pain on the basis of a visual observation of its behavior, and rescue analgesia was administered" (Romans et al. 2005, 90).

A systematic review of 20 manuscripts published in refereed journals that evaluated pain associated with feline onychectomy found, among other things, that in nine published studies "[l]imb use was abnormal when measured at 2 and 12 days following onychectomy, and neither fentanyl patch nor butorphanol administration resulted in normal use of the surgical limb" (Wilson & Pascoe 2016, 5). Troublingly, no clearly superior analgesic treatment could be identified in this systematic review. This means not only that declawing was painful to cats and prohibited proper use of limbs for at least 12 days, but also that no analgesic regimen was able to prevent the pain and abnormal limb use.

Onychectomy was also found to lead to postsurgical neuropathic pain as indicated by "overgrooming associated or not associated with the surgical site, hyperesthetic-type behaviors [i.e., associated with increased sensitivity of the senses], and localized hyperalgesic sensitivity [i.e., more severe experience of pain than normal] when the affected area is stimulated" (Gowan & Iff 2016).

One study used a behavioral measure of pain in cats to examine pain differences after onychectomy, tendonectomy, and a control condition (Cloutier et al. 2005). Onychectomy was found to produce significantly more signs of post-surgical pain in cats than the control procedure (sham surgery), but similar signs of pain compared to tendonectomy.

Longer-term health problems for cats have also been identified after declawing. In one large study of 276 declawed cats, 10 out of 276 cats (4%) developed or continued to have problems after the initial post-surgery recovery period, with one cat having difficulties bearing her own weight for at least four months after surgery (Landsberg 2015). More generally, long-term complications include "infection or osteomyelitis, nail regrowth, chronic pain syndrome, development of a palmigrade stance, lameness, and protrusion of the second phalanx (P2)," and "[p]ain and lameness after onychectomy is a debilitating complication for the patient and can cause significant emotional stress for the pet owner" (Singh & Brisson 2016).

Given the pain and high rates of complications associated with declawing, we may reasonably conclude that it is a harmful procedure to cats. Some harmful procedures may nevertheless be ethically justified, for example when a surgery is expected to help a patient—whether human or feline. Surgeries generally cause some harm (e.g., the cutting of flesh, risks of complications, etc.), but such harms are generally deemed ethically permissible when they stand to significantly improve health and wellbeing. Seen in this light, the finding by

[5] A systematic review of studies is beyond the scope of this article. The studies covered in this article, among which there is at least one systematic review (Wilson & Pascoe 2016), suffice, I believe, to show that current forms of declawing surgeries are directly harmful to cats. However, even if these procedures turn out to be less directly harmful than described in this article—or even if novel declawing surgeries were to be developed in the future that do not cause pain and/or complications—then there are still reasons to think that declawing is harmful to cats in the ways that I discuss later in the article.

Landsberg (2015) that 4% of cats experienced longer-term complication after declawing might be considered acceptable if it concerned a lifesaving or medically necessary surgery. In the case of declawing, however, a 4% longer-term complication rate is unacceptable for an elective surgery that does not stand to directly increase a cat's health and wellbeing. For there is no case to be made that declawing cats benefits them directly.

Beyond particular and very limited cases where onychectomy is medically indicated—where surgery is in cats' best interests and therefore ethically justified—declawing offers no medical benefits to cats (Waite 2021; Heath 2023). The closest argument about direct benefits to cats is one that is sometimes made against declawing bans, namely that such bans will lead to an increase in cats being euthanized and/or relinquished. The idea is that, if declawing is no longer an option, then people with cats who exhibit undesirable behavior (e.g., destruction of furniture through scratching) will no longer have recourse to the surgery and may therefore choose to give their cats away (which, in turn, may lead to cats being euthanized). However, not only is this still not a *direct* argument for declawing cats, but the empirical data do not even support the argument. A large study on the effects of a declawing ban on feline surrender intake and euthanasia, which examined records of cats admitted to the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the 36 months prior to ($n = 41,157$) and after ($n = 33,430$) a provincial ban on elective onychectomy, found that "legislation banning elective onychectomy does not increase the risk of feline shelter relinquishment—for destructive behavior or overall—and is unlikely to have a significant effect on shelter euthanasia or length of stay" (Ellis et al. 2021, 739). In fact, the proportion of requests for euthanasia was found to have significantly decreased after the ban. There is also an important flipside to this argument, in that declawing cats may make it more difficult to place and/or release them. As Jennifer Doll poignantly sketches the issue, "Every cat brought in to [my clinic] that is too wild for adoption yet cannot be released because of being declawed becomes my problem; I am the one who has to euthanize these animals" (2016, 1132). Declawing may ultimately hurt cats' chances of being released if not adopted, given that they have lost the ability to survive outside.

Indirect Declawing Benefits to Human Beings and Human Responsibilities

The ostensible benefits of declawing are often framed indirectly in terms of benefits to human beings. Emblematic of the disparity between direct concerns for cats and benefits to human beings is the following conclusion drawn from a scientific study about behavioral problems following tendonectomy and onychectomy: "Although tendonectomy and onychectomy involved some medical complications and behavior changes following surgery, owners had positive attitudes regarding both surgeries after the immediate postoperative period" (Yeon et al. 2001, 43). Framing benefits of declawing surgeries in terms of positive attitudes of owners misses the heart of the discussion when it comes to the ethics of declawing. From an ethical perspective, the satisfaction of cat guardians post-declawing hardly matters because it does not justify the pain, high risks of complications, and other negative outcomes that cats are made to endure by having to go through the procedure.

Another argument for declawing that is often given from the perspective of human beings is that it can protect immunocompromised people from the potentially harmful effects of scratching. Perhaps the case for declawing may be stronger here, so that declawing may be more ethically acceptable in these more limited cases. However, disease specialists do not recommend declawing as a solution to risks surrounding scratching, especially when the "risk from scratches for [immunocompromised] people is less than those from bites, cat litter or fleas carried by cats" (HSUS 2023). Declawing has also not been found to decrease aggressive behavior in cats and is in any case unlikely to resolve aggression problems "owing to the potential for cats to bite as an alternative to scratching" (Mills et al. 2016). Given the

finding that a significant number of cats exhibited increased biting behavior post-declawing (Yeon et al. 2001), it appears that declawing merely stands to replace aggressive scratching with aggressive biting. This is to be expected, since the *reasons* for a cat's aggressive behavior are not in any way addressed by removing her ability to scratch. To tackle aggression problems in cats, other solutions are clearly needed, which are often recommended by veterinarians and other experts (e.g., behavioral therapy, increased monitoring, education about stressors and overstimulating environments [HSUS 2023]). Declawing is an unviable and unjustifiably harmful response to the effects of scratching, which does not benefit the cat in terms of overall wellbeing.

When a human being becomes a cat's guardian, she must take the cat's interests and welfare seriously. That guardians ought to promote the basic welfare of companion animals—in this case, cats—is uncontroversial. Burgess-Jackson has eloquently argued that "the act of taking an animal into one's life or home, through purchase, gift, or adoption, generates responsibilities to it, the main one being to provide for its needs, which […] are many and varied" (1999, 159). Yet, in the discussion of the ethics of declawing, we are not even concerned about any wider array of feline needs beyond the basic need not to be caused unnecessary pain and discomfort. Guardians have direct and indirect responsibilities to protect companion animals from harm (Cooke 2011). On that basis alone, guardians fail to discharge their basic duties toward cats by putting them through an unnecessarily painful and risky surgery that does not benefit them.[6]

Not only guardians have responsibilities toward cats. Veterinarians also have professional duties, one important one being not to cause unnecessary harm to the animals under their care. As one veterinarian puts it, declawing cats is inconsistent with the oath to work for "the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering" (Heath 2023). A general ethical argument for the medical treatment of companion animals holds that the two decision-makers regarding treatment (i.e., the guardian and the veterinary surgeon) should be based on the best interests of the animal, "with both human decision-makers acting as advocates for the animal requiring treatment" (Gray & Fordyce 2020). Given that cats do not medically require declawing (except in very limited cases when medically indicated), and given the pain and risks associated with it, declawing surgery does not serve a cat's best interests.

Perhaps the discussion so far suffices to establish that declawing cats for nonmedical purposes is unethical. It certainly does not seem to directly serve cats' best interests, and one is inclined to follow Catrina J. Waite's verdict that declawing, "simply put, is an archaic practice that has no right to be in this modern world of better veterinarian knowledge, enhanced ideas of morality, and heightened standards of welfare" (2021, 721).

Importantly, however, it is not only that declawing cats causes them pain and discomfort to no benefit. As the following section argues, removing a cat's claws—even if this were to cause no pain and direct harm—is also unjust to cats to the extent that it undermines their capability to flourish.

Declawing Undermines Feline Flourishing

Martha Nussbaum's capability approach was originally developed as a theory of justice for human beings, as she initially applied Amartya Sen's quality of life approach (focused on basic capabilities) to women living in poverty conditions (Nussbaum 2000). The fundamental idea of the capabilities approach is that there are basic capabilities that are necessary for human agency and a flourishing life. These capabilities are universal and ought to be

[6] It must be noted that, on this point, Kantian accounts of animal ethics like Korsgaard's (2020b) would also object, given that cats are here treated not as ends-in-themselves but as means toward human interests and aims.

politically protected. Nussbaum follows John Rawls in understanding capabilities as "the object of an overlapping consensus among people who otherwise have very different comprehensive conceptions of the good" (Nussbaum 2000, 5).

Nussbaum's capabilities approach includes the notion of a social minimum or threshold. If a person's ability to exercise any of the capabilities falls below a certain point (or fails to reach a threshold), then we ought to conceive this as an instance of injustice (Nussbaum 2000, 7). An important feature of Nussbaum's account is that the central capabilities are nonnegotiable: a high above-threshold capability to execute one's practical reasoning, for instance, does not offset a below-threshold capability to engage one's imagination. There are no tradeoffs between capabilities. To do justice to a person, all capabilities must be maintained at or above threshold levels. Nussbaum has provided a provisional list, which "remains open-ended and humble" (2000, 77), of the following ten central human capabilities: (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity, (4) senses, imagination, thought, (5) emotions, (6) practical reason, (7) affiliation, (8) other species, (9) play, (10) control over one's environment.[7]

Importantly, Nussbaum has extended her capabilities approach to nonhuman animals (2006; 2022). Nussbaum draws on Aristotle's notions of dignity, awe, and wonder to argue that there is "something wonderful and wonder-inspiring in all the complex forms of animal life" (Nussbaum 2004, 306) and that nonhuman animals are capable of flourishing in many ways.[8] Just as the capabilities underlying flourishing ought to be safeguarded for human beings, so they must be protected for other animals. An ethical concern for sentient creatures shows that it is "wrong when the flourishing of a creature is blocked by the harmful agency of another" (Nussbaum 2004, 306). From this perspective, respecting the dignity of nonhuman animals means "not only protecting them from suffering and death, but also providing opportunities to exercise capabilities central to flourishing" (Reed 2021, 546). Other animals, just like humans, "have, each of them, a form of life that involves a set of important goals toward which they strive" (Nussbaum 2022, 96).

Nussbaum argues, then, that nonhuman animals (also) have basic capabilities that must be maintained at acceptable threshold levels as a matter of justice (2022). She advocates a pluralist conception of the good, emphasizing the diverse ways in which nonhuman animals can and do flourish. Furthermore, while some animals flourish in similar ways to other animals, including human beings, some species have species-specific ways of flourishing. She therefore proposes extending the general list of human capabilities to nonhuman animals, while at the same time advocating that it should be amended to account for species-specific flourishing.[9] The main categories of the human capabilities list, Nussbaum argues, "suitably fleshed out," provides a good basis for the principles on which animal justice may be based (Nussbaum 2004, 314).

How does this capabilities approach inform the discussion about the ethics of declawing cats? One of the most common rationales for declawing is to prevent cats from being able to scratch (e.g., at precious furniture). Scratching, however, is a fundamental part of feline

[7] For Nussbaum's most recent discussion of these central capabilities, see *Justice for Animals* (2022, 88-89).
[8] Ilea (2008) argues that Nussbaum does not need Aristotle's observations about awe and wonder to ground her capabilities approach to nonhuman animals. Further discussion of this issue lies outside the scope of the article, but it should be noted that the specific arguments about capabilities and feline flourishing presented in this article do not require Aristotle's ideas about awe and wonder (whether or not some of Nussbaum's arguments do).
[9] It should be noted that Nussbaum does not extend her capabilities approach to nonsentient animals, thus excluding nonsentient animals from the scope of justice. This limitation has had led to criticism (e.g., Melin & Kronlid 2016; Read & Birch 2023; but see Fulfer [2013] for an argument about how Nussbaum's extension of the capabilities approach to nonhuman animals *can* include nonsentient life). While this is clearly an important matter, I cannot further address it here. Thanks to anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

behavior (CVMA 2012). While, in the wild, cats "use their claws to catch prey, defend themselves, and escape from predators," at home this natural behavior among cats translates to "attacking toys and climbing to favorite perches" (HSUS 2023). Declawed cats must remain indoors after having been declawed, because, having lost the use of their claws, they can no longer adequately defend themselves (Sakura 2023). Additionally, because cats' paws contain scent glands, "scratching is also a way of putting their scent in their territory, which helps them feel at home and secure" (HSUS 2023).

It is worth quoting at length the ASPCA's (2003) position statement about the role that claws plays in the lives of cats:

> "Cats' claws are a vital part of their arsenal for both offense and defense. They use them to capture prey and to settle disputes with or escape from other animals or people who are hurting or threatening them. As part of their daily rituals, cats instinctually pull the claws on their front paws through surfaces that offer resistance. They do this to mark their territory, exercise muscles normally used in hunting, relieve stress, and remove worn sheaths from their nails."

Cats' claws, then, are imperative to their unique existence and constitute their primary method of defense.[10] Having and exercising claws is an important part of a cat's ability to be a cat—cats' claws help them achieve cat-specific goals as well as fully develop and realize feline instincts and behaviors.

Recall that Nussbaum proposed ten capacities as fundamental to flourishing, both for human beings and for other animals when suitably fleshed out. Among the full list, the following capabilities appear to be most important for cats in relation to declawing: (1) bodily health, (2) bodily integrity, (3) emotions, (4) play, and (5) control over one's environment. Let us consider each of these capabilities in turn.

The effects of declawing on the first two—bodily health and bodily integrity—should be clear from the previous discussion about the harms caused by declawing surgeries. Framing these harms in terms of capabilities allows us to see that declawing significantly undermines both feline bodily health—in the immediate sense and through longer-term complications—as well as feline bodily integrity, since declawing means that cats lose control over a vital part of their anatomy. Specific consequences and risks of declawing, like reduced limb function post-surgery, lameness, hemorrhage, swelling, and infection (Mills, Von Keyserlingk, & Niel 2016; Robinson et al. 2007; Jankowski et al. 1998; Tobias 1994), constitute some of the myriad ways in which declawing threatens and harms cats' capabilities for bodily health and integrity. The finding that 15.4% of declawed cats ceased to use their litter box after declawing surgery (Yeon et al. 2001) suggests that it estranged a significant number of cats from previously established ways of eliminating bodily waste and maintaining bodily health. This is not even to speak of the loss of a fundamental defense mechanism—claws—that cats need to be able to live successfully among other creatures who may threaten or hurt them. Declawing not only directly undercuts cats' health and bodily integrity, but it also significantly hurts cats' chances to successfully protect themselves against attack, thus risking a further breakdown of bodily health and integrity (e.g., through injuries sustained when attacked).

The third capability that is negatively affected by declawing concerns emotions. For Nussbaum, the capability for emotions in human beings means "[n]ot having one's emotional

[10] One might wonder how cats' flourishing affects and potentially diminishes the flourishing of other, prey animals (e.g., birds and rodents). Does cat flourishing entail that cats need to hunt outside? This is an interesting issue, which falls outside of the scope of this paper.

development blighted by fear and anxiety," and "[b]eing able to have attachments to things and people" (2000, 76-77). It only requires a slight change of emphasis to see what the capability for emotions might mean for cats. One function of scratching in cats is to relieve stress (ASPCA 2003), which means that declawing threatens to eliminate an important species-specific way for cats to reduce stress. After declawing, cats may also "become biters because they are in pain and no longer have their claws for defense" (HSUS 2023), thus upsetting and altering their natural coping mechanisms. Furthermore, guardians of declawed cats have reported behavioral changes such as a disliking of paws being handled after surgery as compared to before (Landsberg 1991). By causing negative emotional changes in cats and problematizing the handling of now-clawless paws, declawing stands to significantly reduce cats' capabilities for (dealing with) emotions and emotional experience—whether directly (i.e., by causing stress and anxiety) or indirectly (e.g., by diminishing bonding experiences with their guardians). Moreover, while the finding that 33% of cats were found to develop at least one behavioral problem after declawing (Yeon et al. 2001) wasn't linked to specific emotions, it stands to reason that at least some of the behavioral problems that cats suffered after declawing were emotion-based.

The fourth capability—to play—is also strongly negatively affected by declawing. Cats' claws are crucial to their ability not only to hunt, but also to engage in playful behavior and to interact in positive ways with their environment (see Delgado [2024] for a wide-ranging account of the importance of play for cats[11]). Chasing, catching, and clawing at objects form a regular part of cats' play (as any cat guardian knows). Without claws, a cat's ability to engage in such playful and exploratory activities is severely limited. Since declawing can reduce limb function post-surgery (Robinson et al. 2007) and can make the limbs sore and function abnormally, this is another way in which the practice undermines the ability to play—even if cats might still desire to play in more limited ways, without the use of their claws, they may be further deterred from doing so due to surgery-related complications.

Finally, declawing limits a cat's capability to exercise control over her environment. One of the functions of scratching, for instance, is territorial marking (Cozzi et al. 2013), which cats can no longer engage in without the use of their claws. The finding that declawed cats experienced an increase in biting and/or harder biting post-surgery (Landsberg 1991) suggests that at least some declawed cats may develop trouble interacting with their environment. Biting is but a pale substitute for scratching, yet it may be the only way that cats still try to exert some kind of control over the world around them after having been declawed. The fact that cats can no longer adequately defend themselves without claws is, of course, the ultimate loss of control. Not being able to defend—or attack—leaves cats virtually unable to mark territories, which is a major reason why declawed cats must be kept indoors.

Even if one were to object that any one of these five capabilities is not central to feline flourishing, it is important to remember that it is sufficient for Nussbaum that a single capability falls below threshold levels for it to become a matter of justice. To counter the argument that declawing threatens feline capabilities for flourishing, one would therefore have to argue that *none* of the five (or any) feline capabilities are significantly undermined by declawing surgeries. Given the harms of declawing to cats and the fact that declawed cats are left without a key part of their anatomy, it appears difficult indeed to contend that declawing does not at the very least undercut feline bodily health and integrity. If the other arguments succeed, then one will also see how declawing undermines feline capabilities for emotions, play, and control over their environment.

Practical Implications

[11] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this work to my attention.

The harms to cats that are caused directly by declawing surgeries and the harms that ensue to capabilities for feline flourishing are not outweighed by any direct benefits. The potential indirect benefits to guardians carry very little ethical weight. What does it mean, then, to arrive at the conclusion that declawing cats is unethical and, more specifically, unjust? Here, it is worth briefly examining the implications for three parties who are or might potentially be involved in feline welfare and decisions about declawing: guardians, veterinarians, and governments.

For cat guardians, the argument that declawing is unethical means that guardians ought not, from a moral perspective, to consider or request declawing. Only when there are very weighty countervailing reasons to declaw (i.e., when medically indicated) should this practice be considered in consultation with veterinarian specialists. As previously discussed, the inconvenience of having a cat who, say, scratches furniture or even one's person should not lead one to seek out declawing. Declawing will in any case not resolve underlying issues with aggression. Even in the case where scratches may pose higher risks to guardians, there are viable and ethically preferable alternatives. Other solutions must be considered—non-surgical options that do not cause cats pain or undermine their ability to flourish. In the case of undesired or excessive scratching, for instance, veterinarians have recommended that guardians: (1) provide suitable implements ("scratchers") for normal scratching behavior, (2) offer appropriate feline environmental enrichment, (3) engage in suitable claw care by regularly trimming claws, (3) consider temporary synthetic nail caps, and (4) consider synthetic facial pheromone sprays/diffusers to help relieve feline anxiety or stress (Suska et al. 2017). It is worth noting that many already oppose declawing. A large survey of Canadians revealed that most people (56.4%) believe that declawing should be banned (Stegall et al. 2017).

Veterinarians have an ethical duty to persuade cat guardians against declawing, to offer good counsel to guardians about alternatives to declawing, and to properly educate guardians about the risks and harms of declawing. This is especially important because guardians of companion animals "very often seem to have insufficient knowledge about animal behavior" (Endenburg & Vorstenbosch 2011, 129). Yet, the arguments in this article suggest that merely providing education and attempting to persuade guardians is insufficient. Given that declawing is unethical, no veterinarian should perform onychectomies or tendonectomies unless strictly necessary from a medical perspective and for the sake of a cat's health and wellbeing.[12] From an ethical perspective, there is insufficient justification for veterinarians to conduct elective declawing surgeries. While the AVMA discourages declawing, it "respects the veterinarian's right to use professional judgment when deciding how to best protect their individual patients' health and welfare" (2023). Presumably, concerns about autonomy underlie some of the opposition to declawing bans by veterinarians themselves. Although it is important to respect the autonomy of veterinarians, there are clearly limits to this principle. Established animal rights and professional duties already limit veterinarians' autonomy in myriad ways. The preceding arguments suggest that declawing cats ought not to be up to the

[12] In places where declawing is not outlawed, cat guardians could simply 'shop around' until they find a vet willing to declaw their cat for non-medical reasons. This possibility underscores the need for legislation to outlaw declawing (rather than leave it up to the discretion of veterinarians). Furthermore, vets may be faced with guardians who insist that the choice is between declawing or euthanizing their cat. Again, legislation will help here, in that it will remove declawing as a genuine option. But it perhaps also highlights the need for guardians to consider the issue of cats and claws carefully before they commit to guardianship, and asks of vets that they think about and offer alternatives to both declawing and euthanizing cats to such guardians. Research discussed earlier in this paper that a provincial ban on elective onychectomy did not increase the risk of euthanasia (Ellis et al. 2021) should alleviate some of these concerns. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

discretion of veterinarians; veterinary surgeons practicing in countries or states where cat declawing is not illegal must, from an ethical perspective, refuse to perform such surgeries.

Outlawing declawing may have the additional benefit of easing the burden on veterinary surgeons who may otherwise have to face moral choices about whether to declaw cats—for instance, when guardians strongly insist on onychectomy or tendonectomy despite veterinarians' reluctance to perform surgery. Declawing is a controversial procedure among veterinarians, with most veterinarians seeming to prefer alternatives. As one survey study of 3.441 veterinarians shows, most reported performing onychectomy only infrequently (61.4%) and most (74.6%) reported that they recommended nonsurgical alternatives (Ruch-Gallie et al. 2016). In another study of 500 veterinarians, 73.3% reported performing onychectomy only after recommending alternatives (Kogan et al. 2016). Cat declawing bans therefore stand to help both cats and reluctant veterinarians (Heath 2023). That a majority of veterinarians would prefer not to declaw cats for non-medical reasons makes sense. Veterinarians, after all, wish to better the lives of the cats that are brought into their practice and to avoid causing them unnecessary pain.

Finally, having established that declawing is unethical, national governments and states that have not yet banned declawing must enact appropriate laws against feline declawing for non-medical purposes. Bans can also be important to prevent derivative unethical practices, like housing complexes requiring cats to be declawed (see Waite 2021 for more examples of these kinds of practices). Making declawing illegal is not only ethically justified by virtue of the highly skewed ratio of harms to nonexistent benefits for cats. As this article has argued, the detrimental and far-reaching consequences of declawing for feline flourishing also makes safeguarding functioning claws for cats a matter of justice.

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