



Review

Ethics of animal use

Peter Sandøe and Stine B. Christiansen (eds.)

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“Ethics of animal use” by Peter Sandøe and Stine Christiansen of the University of Copenhagen is one of the first books directly designed to be used as a textbook to teach animal ethics in veterinary and animal science courses at university level. The authors have also prepared an internet based learning tool called “Animal Ethics Dilemma”, accessible free of charge at <http://ae.imcode.com/en/servlet/StartDoc>, which is structured around the same ethical framework as the book.

The book deals with the most important challenges of present animal use and explains different possible solutions in light of five major theories in the current debate: contractarianism, utilitarianism, the animal rights view, relationism and the view of respect for nature. The authors do not take any particular position, but rather try to offer tools for discussion in order to increase the reader’s own critical appraisal. Each chapter has been written together with different experts in the various fields. The authors highlight (p. 17-18) the importance of ethics for veterinarians and animal scientists. Professionals in these fields should study animal ethics, because it is important for them to be able to make their positions understandable to people and to deal with the diversity of opinions regarding humane treatment of animals *in a rational manner*, avoiding the recourse to feelings that are often unstable and ambivalent and encourage double standards. In this way, the authors insert themselves explicitly into the tradition of *rationalistic* ethics, excluding any appeal to emotions, as opposed to other theories of animal ethics, such as feminist animal ethics.

The core message of the first chapter is the fact that the rationale behind animal protection has changed dramatically. These changes have gone from the utilitarian view of the past (animals are there for humans’ use), to the anti-cruelty legislation of the 18th century and on to the promotion of animal welfare popular since the 1950s. The change from the anti-cruelty to the welfare legislation is explained by an analysis of the changing contextual conditions of farm animal use and production due to industrialisation and market-pressures. After the Second World War, public policies in Western countries promoting more abundant and cheaper food brought on an intensification of animal production. In northern Europe, immediately after the Second

World War it was typical for people to spend between 25% and 33% of their income on food, whereas nowadays this has been reduced to 10-15%.

In the second chapter the authors present in detail the five major ethical theories of the debate. The contractarian view is described as being based on an agreement between rational, independent and self-interested persons who have something to gain from this agreement, as well as in which the maltreatment of animals is described as wrong only if some contractors refuse it explicitly. Unfortunately, the authors forget to mention some valuable recent works that show how at least some forms of this theory entail that non-human animals possess direct moral status, independent of their utility for rational agents (see for example Rowland, 1998; Scanlon, 1998). Utilitarianism is then described as the tradition that pointed out the relevance of an animal’s capacity for suffering. This should lead to the recognition of their moral status and force us to deal with the consequences of how we treat them. The most important reference here is to Peter Singer, but his position on killing animals goes back to an older article (1979), in which he argued that there are no problems in slaughtering animals for meat as long as they have had a good life and the slaughtering itself is painless, but it ignores the change in Singer’s later version of practical ethics (1993), where he inscribed the question of killing with a more sophisticated account of personal beings. This is, I think, an important difference, because Singer’s latest position seems to contrast with what the authors described as the utilitarian position that animal lives are replaceable. The *animal rights view* is described as the one directly opposed to the concept of animal use, since it puts some clear and definitive limits on our treatment of animals (it is mainly described as an abolitionist position). The *relational view* is the approach that highlights the importance of our relationships to animals and is based upon considering animals in a sort of hierarchical order (sociozoological scale) that is widely accepted in our society, or so argue the authors. The last position is the *view of respect for nature*, originally developed in the environmental debate, which concentrates on the moral value of species. Interesting is the fact that the authors conclude the chapter by highlighting



the possibility of “hybrid views”, that is, a combination of different elements from these ethical traditions. This recognition indirectly broaches the issue of the insufficient and sometimes excessive rigidity of ethical frameworks when they face actual concrete situations.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the concept of a good life for animals, a normative concept that relies on values but that can take some important insights from empirical studies on the welfare of animals, considering in particular health, physiology and behaviour. On the basis of three theories of a good life for animals (hedonism, perfectionism and preference theory) the authors discuss very interesting and controversial examples of the care of farm animals: is it better for hens to be blind so that they do not succumb to acts of cannibalism or feather-picking and are in general better able to cope with their environment, or is it better that they be kept in a flock where they have more space but exhibit cannibalism?

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the role of veterinarians and other animal science professionals. On the one hand, it describes the tension between the self-understanding of these professionals as animal advocates and, on the other hand, the fact that they are hired by animal owners and also hold a responsibility toward society (in the case of contagious animal diseases and by giving information about the care of animals).

The use of animals in food production is specifically addressed in chapter 5, where two strategies are identified. These two strategies are the more progressive and the gradual one of animal welfare, which is promoted by an increasing body of regulation, for example in the EU, and the abolitionist one of vegetarianism/veganism.

Chapter 6 addresses the issue, which is controversial but less reflected upon, of controlling animals with infectious diseases. These diseases include zoonoses, diseases that can spread from animals to humans via meat or other animal products, as well as plague and rabies. This field is a clear example of the conflict between the protection of human health and environment as well as human interests in food production, with the interests of an animal’s right to live. (The authors also highlight that changes in risk perception in the public opinion can also affect the entire use of animals, “

if biosecurity becomes a dominant issue in animal production in the future, farm animals will be more likely to be kept indoors in highly controlled systems. This may not always be ideal for animal welfare” (p. 96).

Chapter 7 deals with the challenges surrounding animal experimentation. The chapter starts by presenting different conclusions on the legitimacy of performing experiments on animals and then goes on to discuss the interesting topics of benefits. Examples of both useful and useless animal experiments are possible, but there is also the important problem of

a lack of validation of animal experiments. Furthermore, the authors point out that huge numbers of animals are used for experiments in livestock production or for drugs that differ only slightly from existing drugs, but that these experiments provide gains for companies or some “mundane” fields (like cosmetics) and are therefore increasingly subjects of controversy.

Chapter 8 addresses the issue of the respect and welfare of companion animals. Although it could be argued that people generally have strong interests in providing their animal companions with a good life, they sometimes tend to misunderstand the needs of animals (either indirectly or because of ignorance), or they are more strongly guided by their own preferences. For example, is an indoor life (with comfort and sufficient food) good for a cat? Is tail docking to avoid injuries good for the animal?

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the issues emerging in the field of biotechnology. The first applications of genetic engineering go back to reproductive biotechnology and were used to increase the production traits of animals. Due to the negative correlation between the increase of productivity of animals and their health, the application of biotechnology on farm animals opens a wide range of concerns. “So, animals are being changed; they will be *qualitatively different* depending on how breeding and biotech is applied. However, they will also be *numerically different* – they will be different individuals” (p. 146). The new concern in the debate regards the possible violation of an animal’s integrity, i.e. of its own nature or species-specific characteristics through biotechnology, and the response to this question goes transverse to the five different ethical frameworks discussed.

Chapter 10 deals with conflicts arising from the management and use of wild animals in national parks, protected areas and zoos. It offers interesting historical insights into our relationships with wild animals. This use generates ethical dilemmas “in which human preferences and interests, concern for individual animals, and the value of wild nature have to be balanced against each other” (p. 168).

All in all, the book is an extremely important work, because it presents animal ethical dilemmas in a comprehensible and accessible way and makes the topic very interesting for a wide audience. The internet tool is also a very good tool to promote discussion, and I hope that both will find widespread use among students.

References

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- Scanlon, T. M. (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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