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Summary

Companion animal issues give rise to dilemmas and disagreements. These dilemmas and disagreements arise due to different interpretations of scientific findings, different understandings of what constitutes animal welfare, different views about which values matter, different ways of weighting or adding up the relevant values, and different ideas about how the relevant values should be put into practice. To explain how ethical priorities have evolved, first we give a brief overview of the history of current Western attitudes to animal companions, and how the veterinary and other professions developed to deal with companion animals. Next, two specific issues that give rise to dilemmas and disagreements in companion animal ethics are discussed: 1) the issue of whether all dogs should be routinely neutered; and 2) the issue of feeding and the related problems of canine and feline obesity.

Introduction

Dogs, cats and other animals kept as companions are usually regarded as friends or family members. This raises, we argue, ethical questions rather different from those generated by the use of animals in industrial agriculture or science. Companion animals usually benefit from human affection and care, and relate to us as particular individuals. But this can be a mixed blessing for the animals concerned. First, they have, so to speak, to share the burdens and expectations of human culture. For instance, they are bred to reflect features thought to be desirable in an animal companion; and where their behaviour is perceived to be culturally unacceptable, it may be suppressed. Second, the human-animal companion relation can fail in various ways, leading to neglect, euthanasia or abandonment. Third, when professionals deal with these companion animals they have to consider not only the animal's own well being, but also the owner's attachment to the animal. All of these factors create ethical questions and problems unique to the companion animal relation.

These factors further complicate the dilemmas and disagreements that are already common in animal ethics. To be able to handle and understand these dilemmas and disagreements in a professional way, it's

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important to understand how they arise from different interpretations of scientific findings, different understandings of what constitutes animal welfare, different views about which values matter, different ways of weighing or adding up the relevant values, and different ideas about how the relevant values should be put into practice. In this presentation, focusing on dogs and cats, we will outline some key ethical issues generated by our special relationships with companion animals. First, we will give a brief overview of the history of current Western attitudes to animal companions, of how the veterinary and other professions developed to deal with companion animals, and of how these developments brought with them new views on what matters in our dealings with dogs and cats. Secondly, we discuss two specific issues – both of which generate dilemmas and disagreements. These issues are whether all dogs should be routinely neutered, and feeding and related problems of canine and feline obesity.

The presentation is based on ongoing work on a book by the authors entitled *Companion Animal Ethics*, to be published by Blackwell in 2014. The discussion of the two issues is, in addition, based on two recent research papers (Palmer *et al.* 2012; Sandøe *et al.* in press).

Historical developments

Living with animal companions is an important part of human life, found throughout history and across the globe. However, in medieval and early modern Europe, particular interpretations of the Christian tradition meant that attitudes of affection and closeness towards animal companions were less accepted, and may have been less widespread. However, these attitudes gradually changed in Europe, and in other parts of the Western world, from the seventeenth century onwards. Not only did it gradually become more accepted and common to keep dogs and birds, and later cats, as companions, but the animals also through closely co-existing, adapted to many aspects of the human lifestyles. By the late-twentieth century the lives of animal companions had become heavily controlled by people in terms of breeding, training and diet.

As keeping animals as companions became more widespread, the professions that emerged to cater for animals in other contexts began to take animals as companions more seriously. The veterinary profession, in particular, has transformed since the 1930s, to include companion animals as a key area of work – a transformation that coincided with the gradual replacement of horses by motorized transport. Alongside veterinarians, there has recently been a significant growth in other companion animal professionals including nurses, therapists, trainers and shelter workers. This has led to a corresponding expansion in services available to cater for the perceived needs of companion animals, from vaccinations and spaying, grooming and kennelling, to the provision of specialised medical procedures and end-of-life care.

As the keeping of cats and dogs as companions has expanded, along with the provision of professional care for them, so too has the understanding of what constitutes a good life for a companion animal, how to balance the different aspects of what constitutes a good life, and how to balance the concern for animal welfare against different human interests and concerns. For example, in the case of cats, there is a growing movement towards thinking that to have the best welfare, cats should be confined indoors. On this view,

safety and control seem to be given priority over the freer, but riskier, life typically enjoyed by domestic cats in the past. This is in conspicuous contrast to developments in the understanding of farm animal welfare, where more freedom to roam, rather than less, is normally emphasized (although, of course, the restrictions faced by farm animals are often more severe than those faced by companion animals).

In the remaining part of the presentation we will take a closer look at two companion animal issues where there are some clear dilemmas and disagreements, the issue of routine neutering of dogs and the issue of obesity in cats and dogs.

The issue of routine neutering

Influential parts of the veterinary profession, most notably the American Veterinary Medical Association, are promoting the routine neutering of dogs that will not be used for breeding purposes. However this view is not universally held, even among representatives of the veterinary profession. In particular, some veterinary associations in Europe defend the view that even when unwanted reproduction is not a concern, neutering of male dogs and bitches should not be routine, but be decided on a case by case basis. So, there is some disagreement here over routine neutering, although recently, even in Europe, the American view is gaining ground.

Can the routine neutering of dogs, in cases where uncontrolled reproduction is not an issue, be ethically defended? We start by reviewing the veterinary literature on the effects of neutering on dogs. The focus here is both on the welfare of neutered animals themselves, and on behavioral and other effects that may not directly affect the animals' welfare, but that may be motivating factors for owners to neuter their dogs. Here it becomes clear that justification for routine neutering, particularly of confined male dogs, does not follow from claims about the dogs' own welfare. The welfare costs of neutering male dogs, in terms of the increased risk of very serious diseases, may well outweigh the welfare benefits.

Then, building on this veterinary material, we expand the discussion to consider routine neutering from a variety of ethical perspectives. These ethical approaches offer different degrees of concern about, or opposition to, routine neutering. Finally, based on this ethical exploration, we argue that routine neutering, at least in the case of non-free-ranging dogs, raises significant ethical questions, and from some ethical perspectives, looks highly problematic.

Feeding and the problem of canine and feline obesity

In the past, insufficient feeding was a widespread problem for companion dogs and cats. However now, in the richer parts of the world, overfeeding is a much bigger problem. Approximately one in three dogs and cats kept as a companions in developed countries is overweight, and about one in 20 is obese.

Evidence suggests that being even moderately overweight results in diminished life expectancy, and that obesity may lead to serious disease and related grave welfare problems. However, a restricted diet may also have a negative effect on animal welfare in terms of elevated stress levels and feelings of hunger. So, this leads to a real welfare dilemma: between protecting the animal against unpleasant experiences of hunger, and protecting its health.

The difficulties here extend beyond the dilemma between animal health and negative experience of hunger, because eating is such a meaningful practice, embedded in broader social and emotional relations. Overweight and low-income owners, for instance, are more likely to have an overweight dog, suggesting the issue is indicative of broader social problems. It also seems that owners who view their animals as being like fellow humans, or, in the case of cats, have close emotional ties to them, tend to overfeed them.

So, while preventing companion animals from getting seriously obese is a good thing viewed from most ethical points of view, the problem is not easily solved. If overfeeding is closely tied to the owner's harmonious relationship with the animal, and to the social and emotional circumstances of the owner, this may lead to dilemmas for veterinarians involved in caring for the animal.

Conclusion

The two examples discussed above highlight potential conflicts both between different ideas of what constitutes good animal welfare, and the ability of owners to live well with their animals (which may have indirect impacts on an animal's welfare). Owners may have better, closer relations with over-fed and neutered animals; the animals may have less good health, but benefit in other ways from close relations to their owners. Veterinarians and other animal professionals, then, need to try to negotiate through dilemmas such as these, and to engage in discussions about which values should take priority in such cases.

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