VETERINARY MEDICINE AND ETHICS

Given the centrality of ethics to the veterinary profession, it is surprising how little attention veterinary medicine has devoted to ethical issues. A study of veterinary practice conducted in the early 1980s showed that veterinarians spend more time managing ethical issues than in any other single activity. It is also arguable that the major challenges facing veterinary medicine in North America are societal ethical questions: What should be done about the welfare of food animals raised in intensive confinement systems? Ought the legal status of animals as property be modified, and if so how? Given the strength of the human-companion animal bond, graphically illustrated during Hurricane Katrina, ought the value of companion animals be raised from mere market worth? How should veterinarians respond to the thinking underlying increasing public demand for non-evidence-based alternative medicine? How does one determine and weigh considerations of animal quality of life in medical decision-making?

Organized veterinary medicine and veterinary educational institutions have exhibited little understanding of or formal training in dealing with ethics. Indeed, historically veterinary ethics amounted to little more than veterinary etiquette, with ethical codes addressing issues like advertising, the size of one’s sign, sending Christmas cards, and totally ignoring issues like teaching surgery using multiple animals in sequential procedures, or regulation of the use of animals in research, or the historical absence of analgesia in veterinary teaching, research, and practice.

This disregard for genuine ethical issues came from a variety of sources, including the historical subordination of veterinary medicine to agriculture and the general failure of science and medicine to embrace ethics, captured in the mantra that science is value-free. But as society has become more concerned about animal welfare issues and animal treatment, and has also grown more litigious, ethics is ignored by professions at their own peril. It is thus imperative for nascent veterinarians to enjoy at least a rudimentary understanding of the logical geography of ethics.

At the outset, it is essential to distinguish between Ethics 1 and Ethics 2. Ethics 1 is the set of beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, fair and unfair, that all persons acquire in society as they grow up. One learns Ethics 1 from a multiplicity of sources—parents, friends, church, media, teachers, and so on. For most people, these diverse teachings are haphazardly stuffed into one’s mental hall closet, and are not critically examined or much discussed. Yet the chances of their forming a coherent whole are negligible. Consider, for example, what parents teach about sexual ethics, versus what one learns from friends, college roommates, and films.

Ethics 2, on the other hand, is the systematic study and examination of Ethics 1, addressing such questions as whether the beliefs in question are consistent, why
and if one must have ethics, whether there is a coherent way to affirm that some ethics views are better than others, how one justifies Ethics 1, statements, etc. One learns Ethics 2 from philosophers, since philosophy is the branch of knowledge whose purpose is to critically examine what we take for granted.

Some further distinctions must be made. Under Ethics 1, we can distinguish three subclasses, social ethics, personal ethics, and professional ethics. A moment’s reflection makes one realize that, if we wish to avoid a life of chaos and anarchy where, as Hobbes put it, life is “nasty, brutish, and short,” ethical notions must be binding on everyone in society. That is what one may call the social consensus ethic, and it is most clearly found reflected in the legal system. The social consensus ethic does not dictate all ethical decisions. Much is left to an individual’s personal ethic, his or her own beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad. Such ethically-charged issues as what one eats, what one reads, what charities one chooses to support are, in Western democracies, left to one’s personal ethic, with the proviso that the societal ethic trumps the personal on matters of general interest.

What is professional ethics? A profession is a subgroup of society entrusted with work society considers essential, and which require specialized skills and knowledge, for example, law, medicine, veterinary medicine, accounting. Loath to prescribe the methods by which a profession fulfills its function, society in essence says to professionals: “You regulate yourselves the way we would regulate you if we understood in detail what you do. If you fail to do so, we will hammer you with draconian regulation.” Not to respect this charge is to risk loss of autonomy, as has occurred in the United States with unethical accounting practices.

Some years ago, Congress became concerned about excessive use of antibiotics in animal agriculture, both as growth promotion and as a way of masking poor husbandry, since such overuse led to the evolution of dangerous antibiotic-resistant pathogens. When it became clear that veterinary medicine was partly responsible, Congress considered withdrawing the privilege of extra-label drug use from veterinarians. Had this indeed transpired, veterinary medicine as we know it would have been dealt a mortal blow, since veterinary medicine relies on human drugs used in an extra-label fashion.

It is important to stress that every area of ethics is subject to being rationally criticized, else one could make no moral progress. For example, U.S. societal ethics was criticized during the Civil Rights era because segregation was logically inconsistent with the fundamental principles of American democracy.

Similarly, though most people don’t realize it, personal ethics is also subject to rational criticism. For example, it can be argued that a person cannot logically be both a Christian and an ethical relativist, that is, one who believes that good and bad vary from society to society or person to person.

Finally, professional ethics can be rationally criticized, as when Congress was about to punish veterinary medicine for indiscriminate dispensing of antibiotics despite its commitment to ensuring public health.

But before one can deal with an ethical issue, one must realize that it is an issue, and identify all relevant ethical components, even as in medicine one must diagnose before one can treat. However,
identifying all ethically relevant components of a situation is not always easy, as we perceive not only with our sense organs, but also with our prejudices, beliefs, theories, and expectations.

There exists a heuristic device to help veterinarians hone in on all ethical aspects of a case. This involves reflecting on the ethical vectors relevant to veterinary practice, and applying the ensuing template to new situations. Veterinarians have moral obligations to animals, to clients, to peers and their profession, to society in general, to themselves, and to their employees. Ethically charged situations present themselves, where any or all or various combinations of these obligations occur and must be weighed. In every new situation, the veterinarian should consider each of these ethical vectors and see if they apply to the case at hand. In this way, he or she can minimize the chances of missing some morally relevant factor.

The question of a veterinarian’s moral obligation to animals is so important to veterinary medicine that I have called it the Fundamental Question of Veterinary Ethics. The issue, of course, is to whom does the veterinarian owe the primary obligation, owner or animal? On the Garage Mechanic Model, the animal is like a car, where the mechanic owes nothing to the car, and fixes it or not depending on the owner’s wishes. On the Pediatrician Model, the clinician owes primary obligation to the animal, just as a pediatrician does to a child, despite the fact that the client pays the bills. When I pose this dichotomy to veterinarians, the vast majority profess adherence to the Pediatrician model as a moral ideal. Happily, though animals are property, society’s ever-increasing concern with animal welfare is putting increasing limitations on what humans can do with animals.

Leaving obligations to animals aside for the moment, how does one deal with ethical questions regarding people, assuming one has diagnosed all the relevant ethical components? In the simplest cases, of course, the answer is dictated by the social consensus ethic which, for example, prohibits stealing, assault, murder, etc. So, for example, throttling an obnoxious client, however tempting, is not a real option. In other cases, of course, one appeals to one’s personal ethic.

None of this, however, helps us to resolve the Fundamental Question of Veterinary Ethics, since the societal ethic has historically been silent with regard to the moral status of animals and our obligations to them, and few people have bothered to develop a consistent personal ethic theory for animal treatment.

However, as society has developed increasing concern for animal treatment, a characterizable ethic has begun to emerge. In essence, society has demanded that we protect animals’ basic natures and interests even as we use them, just as we protect humans. This means applying the notion of rights to animals. Though animals are legally property and cannot strictly have rights, the same result is being achieved by a proliferation of laws limiting how people can use animals. Thus U.S. laboratory animal laws require pain and distress control, forbid repeated invasive uses, require exercise for dogs, etc. And some European and U.S. laws have forbidden sow stalls. This mechanism is the root of what I have called animal rights as a mainstream phenomenon. This also explains the proliferation of laws pertaining to animals as an effort to ensure their welfare in the face of historically unprecedented uses.
This new ethic is good news for veterinarians, as they can now expect more and increasing social backing for their priority commitment to animals, which I have called the Pediatrician Model. Veterinary medicine must engage and lead in providing rational answers and laws protecting animal wellbeing in all areas of animal use. Not only will job satisfaction increase, but as the status of animals rises in society, so too does the status of these who care for them.

Further Reading

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VIRTUE ETHICS

A virtue ethics is any system, theory, or approach in ethics or morals that regards virtues as a central component. Today, virtue ethics is experiencing a revival. The term virtue refers to traits of character and personality that predispose individuals, including nonhuman animals, to act in good or right ways. In contrast, a vice is a trait inclining them to act in bad or wrong ways. For example, in companion animals as well as people, loyalty and affection are virtues, and meanness and laziness are vices. Due to the influence of Greek, Roman, and Christian thought, virtue ethics dominated Western morals until the 1700s, when it was replaced by approaches based on duties, rights, consequences, utility, and welfare. The latter are centered on externally observable actions and their consequences, rather than on the internally non-observable psychology or mindset required by virtues, such as, dispositions, motivations, purposes, intensions, attitudes, and the like.

Today, ethicists agree that virtues are a central component of ethics and morality, but there the agreement ends. The disagreements today concern how virtues are connected to the other central components of ethics. To be complete, a theory of ethics needs three parts: (1) a theory of virtues that explains what kinds of traits morally good agents ought to have, (2) a theory of duties and rights that explains what makes some actions morally required and others morally prohibited, and (3) a theory of the good that explains why some consequences, things, states of being, and conditions are good and others bad. During the ancient and medieval eras, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and most others believed that virtues were directly tied to real human and animal natures, essences, or souls created and implanted by God or nature. Part of this belief was the idea that everything and everyone have real purposes (telos in Greek) given by nature or God. Consequently, virtues were the traits that enabled individual persons and animals to achieve their natural or God-given purposes.

Modern science and evolutionary biology refute the old belief in real natural purposes. According to evolution, individuals and species populations result from three interrelated processes: reproductive success, genetic variation, and environmental adaptation. These processes are largely random and unpredictable. Consequently, the ancient and medieval belief connecting virtues to natural or divine purposes is no longer plausible. In response to this objection, religious thinkers have proposed ways of fitting their doctrines into the worldview...