



Module 4

Introduction to Animal Welfare Ethics

Student Activities

Questions

1. Briefly describe what the term 'speciesism' means.

(2 marks)

Speciesism is the discrimination against or exploitation of certain animal species by human beings, based on an assumption of mankind's superiority. In its strictest sense, speciesism refers to discrimination purely on the basis of species membership rather than on any secondary qualities of that species.

2. What is the difference between social ethics and personal ethics?

(2 marks)

Social ethics are those moral rules within a society which are agreed upon by most of its members. A society will often give such ethics a legal basis. Personal ethics concern matters that are left to the individual to decide and about which there is more disagreement.

3. What is the difference between giving animals intrinsic moral worth and giving them extrinsic moral worth?

(4 marks)

Animals given extrinsic moral worth have importance via their effects on others (normally humans) who have intrinsic worth; it is the effect that the animals' treatment has on humans that makes it matter ethically. Giving animals intrinsic moral worth means that they matter in their own right, independent of their use to others.

4. Which of the following three statements could be defined as an ethical dilemma? (6 marks)

[Note to lecturer: Morals define personal character, while ethics represent the codified system of values subscribed to by a group of people within which morals can then be applied. A true ethical dilemma is one where there is no outcome that is ethically superior to the other.]

- a) A vet is offered a bribe to falsify a certificate. Should the vet take the bribe?
- b) Two equally lame cows are presented to a vet on a farm. The vet has only one dose of analgesic. Which one does the vet choose to help?
- c) A vet has made a dosing error that could result in adverse effects for a client's dog. Should the vet tell the client at the risk of 'losing' his/her client?

Answers:

- a) Not an ethical dilemma: this is just a moral problem with probably only one ethical solution.
- b) This is an ethical dilemma.
- c) Again, this is a moral problem with probably only one ethical solution. It might also be considered a practical dilemma as the vet may suffer some adverse effects from informing his/her client (loss of client or business or reputation) so an ethical interest (truth-telling) competes with a less ethical interest (self-interest).

5. What is sentience?

(1 mark)

Sentience is the capacity of a being to experience feelings. It is sometimes more specifically defined as the capacity to suffer.

6. Briefly explain the fundamental difference between a utilitarian and a deontological approach to ethics.

(4 marks)

- Utilitarianism focuses on consequences of actions ('consequentialism') and attempts to maximise good consequences over bad ones.
- Deontology is a principle- or rule-based ethical system in which moral conduct is defined not by outcomes but by one's duties or the rules one should obey.

In-class activities

Discussions

The following two discussions explore the intersection of veterinarians and ethics in greater depth. They are applicable for small-group work and each has a suggested time of 40 minutes which includes time for small-group discussions as well as feedback to the rest of the class.

1. Bernard Rollin believes that veterinary ethics contains one particularly fundamental question: whether the veterinarian's first allegiance is to the client or the animal. He expands upon this suggesting that the vet can be viewed in two ways: the garage mechanic and the paediatrician.

Out of the two, which do you believe is the best model? How does this relate to how we view the moral status of animals?

Rollin, B. (2006). *An introduction to veterinary medical ethics: Theory and cases* (2nd ed., pp. 1-41). Oxford: Blackwell.

Key prompts:

If the vet's main allegiance is to his/her client, then this emphasises the extrinsic view of animals' moral worth. Animals are worthy of concern because of the effects on the owner. This might be considered the 'service industry' idea of the profession. This might have several consequences. For example, if the vet does not advocate for the animal but merely does as the owner suggests, then the animal's welfare is entirely dependent on the owner's understanding of the animal's welfare needs and their willingness to meet them.

If the owner is mistaken, or indifferent to the animal, does the vet have a duty to intervene? For example, should the vet accept a client's demands to carry out cosmetic surgery? To euthanise a healthy animal? To keep an animal alive despite extreme suffering? This view might be more prevalent in farm or laboratory animal practice where the main 'purpose' of the animal is its use for the producer (farmer) or scientists. If the proposed treatment in these circumstances is more expensive than the replacement value of the animal, then euthanasia is more likely to be requested.

If the main allegiance is to the animal, then this emphasises the intrinsic viewpoint of animal worth. Likely consequences may be the possibility of dispute with the owner, if the owner's interests or concerns diverge from the animal's interests (or what the vet sees as the animal's interests). It should be remembered that the vet must surely have some moral obligations to the owner. Discussion on trying to balance these interests is important. Often divergence can be reduced by owner education – he or she may simply have an incorrect idea of what is good for the animal or be grateful to be offered alternatives to euthanasia (such as re-homing).

2. While on a farm on other business, a veterinary surgeon is requested to euthanise several unwanted male dairy calves who have no economic value. What should the vet do?

Options include:

1. to do so
2. to refuse and explain why
3. to refuse and not explain, or
4. to make another excuse, such as not having time to carry out the procedure.

Discussion might focus on whether animals have a right to life, and whether death is harmful to them or not. Some of the following questions and arguments will be useful. You may wish to share them with the students at the outset or provide them as prompts if the discussions falter.

- Are the animals 'worth' more than their economic value?
- Does quality of life matter as well as quantity?
- Animals who have low economic worth frequently suffer poor welfare. Perhaps the veal crate, in which the animal is confined without room to turn, is the only alternative life for these animals. Does the fact that the calves are unlikely to have a pleasurable life affect our view of what their lives are morally worth?
- Is there any difference in killing young animals for food and the killing requested here?

If the vet believes that animals do have some sort of right to life, then the decision is still a problem. Should the vet stick by his/her principles (deontology), and refuse to euthanise the calves?

What if the outcome of this might be worse for the calf, such as euthanasia carried out badly by an unqualified person (utilitarian considerations)?

Are there any options for the calf other than death? Can the vet suggest or manufacture other options? The options for re-homing a bull calf will be few, compared to those for a kitten, for example.

What about the argument, 'if I don't do it, then someone else will'?

Is the vet morally responsible for the calf, or does this responsibility lie more with the farmer, who, after all, brought it into existence?

Does the responsibility stop there? What about the responsibility of the milk-drinking, cheese-eating public?

With respect to truth-telling, is the vet obliged to truthfully state reasons if he/she refuses to carry out the procedure (the virtue of honesty)?

Projects

1. Upon entering the veterinary profession, a veterinary graduate will normally have to swear an oath.

- What is the oath to be taken in your country?
- Summarise the interests that the oath requires you to serve. Does it rank them in order of importance or imply any ranking? Does it specifically include or exclude any interest groups? If so, why might this be?
- Does the oath seem to 'fit' any particular ethical theory (e.g. utilitarianism, deontology)? Explain any link that you see.
- Does the oath imply any particular view of the moral status of animals (e.g. 'anticruelty' view; 'animal welfare' view; 'animal rights' view; intrinsic or extrinsic value)? If so, outline what you think this is.
- Could the oath be improved upon? Redraft the oath to show this improvement and explain why you think this is necessary.

2. Veterinary surgeons normally have to abide by a professional code issued by their administrative body. For example, the Royal Veterinary College issues the Guide to Professional Conduct in the UK. This constitutes a vet's 'administrative ethics'. Find a copy of the code issued in your country.

- Summarise how the responsibilities for your patients are specified in your code.
- Does the code contain different responsibilities for different animal types? If so, on what basis (e.g. species; use to man; wild versus domesticated; 'under your care')? Does the code specifically include or exclude any animal types? If so, on what basis?
- Explain the moral basis of animals that best fits the responsibilities explained in the code (e.g. 'anticruelty' view; 'animal welfare' view; 'animal rights' view; intrinsic or extrinsic value).
- If you think the code can be improved, explain how and make your case. This might include criticisms such as consistency or, perhaps, more fundamental criticism such as criticism of the particular moral status of animals implied by the code.