



Module 12

The Application of Animal Welfare Ethics

Student Activities

Questions

1. **Briefly explain the difference between 'equal consideration of interests' and a sliding scale of moral status for different species.**

(4 marks)

Equal consideration suggests that a similar interest deserves equal moral attention, no matter what species it occurs in (therefore equal pain in a fish or horse or human deserves equal consideration), whereas the sliding scale devalues all animals' interests on the basis of species membership. In the sliding scale, an animals' overall moral status depends on its mental complexity, with less complexity equating to less moral consideration.

2. **Provide a brief description of a contractarian view of breeding dogs with genetic defects.**

(4 marks)

Present breeding practices point to an underlying human attitude that lacks understanding and compassion – two desirable traits to which humans should aspire. It is always better act virtuously, and we should breed healthier dogs because that is more consistent with virtuous behaviour. Also, healthier dogs would mean fewer veterinary costs for owners.

3. **Aside from health effects, why might vegetarianism be good for humans?**

(2 marks)

Food animal production, especially intensive production, can be wasteful, yielding less protein than is invested due to the inefficiency of moving up each stage of the food chain. Therefore it takes up useful resources that could be used directly for humans. Livestock production also contributes massively to global warming.

4. What is the difference between 'life-centred' and 'sentience-centred' environmental ethics?**(2 marks)**

In life-centred ethics all living things, including plants, are granted intrinsic moral worth, whereas sentience-centred ethics grants intrinsic worth only to sentient creatures (not plants).

5. Give two differences between eco-centric (environment-centred) ethics and animal ethics.**(4 marks)**

Accept two of the following:

- a) Eco-centric ethics is less concerned with captive or domestic animals.
- b) Eco-centric ethics is concerned with more than just sentient animals, e.g. plants.
- c) Animal ethics is more concerned with pain and death, which are often seen as part of nature by eco-centric ethics.
- d) Eco-centric ethics is more concerned with groups/systems rather than individuals.

6. Give one example of a clash between animal ethics and environmental ethics.**(1 mark)**

Accept one of:

- a) killing animals to protect endangered plants
- b) translocation of endangered species
- c) captive breeding of endangered species
- d) killing animals to control population numbers

In-class activity

Discussion

The following discussions provide both real-life scenarios and broader open questions to allow students to go through the process of applying a variety of different ethical decision-making processes. Each discussion should take between 30–40 minutes, and all are appropriate for both small-group and class-wide discussions.

Should veterinary surgeons intervene to help pedigree dogs reproduce? Construct an ethical matrix to help you decide (it is desirable to have a blackboard or whiteboard available for this exercise).

An example ethical matrix is given below for the overall problem. Students could pick a specific breed or treatment and then construct a matrix for that particular scenario.

Key questions for students to discuss are:

- What is the nature of the treatment? It could be anything from a Caesarean section (invasive, potentially painful surgery) to drug therapy to increase ovulation. Therefore the effects of the treatment and any apparent side-effects should be considered, particularly with respect to effects on welfare of the patient. Is helping to choose the ideal time for mating also part of intervention?
- Does the dog itself benefit from the treatment or is he or she harmed by it? By becoming involved in breeding programmes, the vet may be able to help reduce incidence of diseases with a genetic component (e.g. hip dysplasia). On the other hand, repeated Caesarean sections are unlikely to be in the interests of a bitch.
- Are any problems with the particular breed being considered, such as genetic disease, or phenotypic problems such as brachycephalic airway syndrome? If so, do future generations of puppies deserve moral consideration? Should they be spared suffering by being prevented from coming into existence?
- Is there any problem of overpopulation of dogs in the country concerned? In that case, should resources be spent on trying to make dogs pregnant? Again, there are the usual problems of deontological veterinary refusal on principle versus the utilitarian outlook. In the utilitarian outlook, what would be the consequences of refusal to perform treatment?

One example of a possible ethical matrix for the overall issue is given below.

Example ethical matrix:

	Utilitarian	Deontological	Justice and fairness
DOG	Animal welfare effects of treatment and general welfare of breed.	Unable to consent to invasive treatment. Can this breed behave freely (e.g. is breathing-impaired?)? Are the animal's 'rights' infringed?	Does the dog benefit from treatment? Does it bear all the risks? Do some dogs suffer more than others?
OWNER	Financial well-being of owner: Breeding for profit? Emotional involvement?	Is the dog the owner's property, for the owner to treat as he or she sees fit? Should anyone else have any input?	What if treatment fails? Has the vet explained all risks?
VET	Will decision affect business of private practice either way? Will it trouble the vet's conscience?	Does the vet have the right to refuse such treatment as matter of conscience?	What is the position of other vets on this treatment? Has vet already set precedents with other breeder clients?

Debate

1. Is it ethical to give veterinary treatment to individual wild animals?

Key prompts:

Arguments 'against' include the following.

- If animals have no moral status then it is a waste of resources.
- It is 'natural' for wild animals to suffer in nature and therefore this is as it should be. It should be discussed whether or not 'natural' and 'ethical' mean the same thing. Many philosophers have argued that 'what is' and 'what ought to be' are logically separate from one another. Examples of why thinking like this can be unhelpful include deriving obviously unethical conclusions from natural facts (e.g. ill people should not be treated) or different people deriving different ethical conclusions from the same set of 'natural' facts.

- Interfering with natural selection. This argument may be a version of the naturalistic fallacy as above, since the products of evolution are not necessarily 'bad' or 'good' in a moral sense. However, if good welfare of animals needs them to be well adapted to their environment and future generations of animals have ethical status, this argument could be pursued.
- Interfering with nature in this way might have unexpected consequences, due to our lack of knowledge about the individual, its species and interactions with the local ecosystem. For example, keeping several individuals captive in close confinement may spread viruses, which could be released with the animals.

Arguments 'for' include the following.

- Wild animals may be under the stewardship of humans in some way, such as in a game reserve.
- The animal may have been made ill or injured through the action of humans in some way, for example, by being run over by a car. We have an obligation to compensate for this action.
- Even wild animals suffer and have moral status, therefore we cannot ignore their suffering if it is within our power to do something to reduce it.

Questions to prompt students into further discussion about individual cases might be:

- How much do we know about this animal/disease?
- How stressful (e.g. how long/invasive) is treatment likely to be?
- What is the chance of success? Do we know about longer-term survival?
- Will other advantages be gained, such as knowledge?
- Is the animal from an endangered species? Would this individual animal be more important if it was? Why?

2. A common herbivore is causing a huge amount of damage to an endangered plant species. In this scenario, which matters more ethically, the plant or the animal?

Key points:

- may be seen as a clash between animal ethics or sentience-centred ethics and biocentric or eco-centric environmental ethics
- the clash depicted is stark because it pits animals against plants and individuals against species
- some people would suggest killing the herbivore in order to protect the plant species
- if this were to happen, you need to discuss whether death harms animals and whether the particular way of killing would be likely to harm the animals' welfare. Would this alter how the problem is approached?

- does this solution allow the individual animal's 'rights' to be outweighed by those of the plant species?
- does it matter if a species becomes extinct? Why? Isn't this part of the 'natural process'? What is the basis of any moral status that we give to plants or species? Is this status intrinsic or instrumental?

Projects

1. Many countries have societies that campaign for the environment. Perhaps they wish to preserve a wilderness area or conserve an endangered species. Identify one such organisation from your country and obtain some of their literature. From their literature, give a summary of their main concerns. What is the structure of their argument? What sort of environmental ethics do they seem to have (human, sentience, life or environment-centred ethic)? How do they intend to achieve their aims? Do they have specific projects? How would this organisation's campaign affect the environment, individual animals and people?
2. Pick an animal species that you have seen receiving veterinary treatment. What is its relation to humans (pet, farmed, wild etc.)? List both the interests it has in common and with conflict with people. Are both sets of interests served by veterinary treatment? Are the species and humans in a mutual relationship, or is the relationship biased towards either the animals' or humans' interests? Make the case for your opinion and suggest a remedy if you think the present situation is unsatisfactory. If the present system seems satisfactory then state your reasons for thinking this.
3. Describe a case of veterinary treatment of a wild (free-living) animal you have witnessed. How did the animal come to be presented to the vet (e.g. the vet works in game reserve, or brought by a member of public, etc.)? What was the problem? What was its cause? Diagnosis? Treatment? Outcome? What were the welfare consequences for the individual animal? Was it euthanised, released or held in captivity after treatment? What is the moral value normally ascribed to this animal species in your country (e.g. 'pests' are often given no moral status)? How did this affect the animal's treatment? Discuss the ethics of treating this animal, giving arguments for and against and your opinion on whether, in this case, it was justified.
4. Pick a species of animal that you believe deserves better treatment than it normally receives in your country. Design a campaign leaflet from an imaginary pressure group explaining why this animal deserves better consideration and how this might be brought about. Use arguments from both a human perspective (i.e. why it would be good for humans to do this) and from an environmental perspective.