



Companion animals

chapter 8

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Companion Animals¹

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The suggestion that the keeping of companion animals is just another way of using animals may upset some people. Rather, these people may argue, keeping animals as companions is a way of life that includes animals on a par with friends and members of the family. And the similarities are obvious:

Someone living with a pet is living with a family. A pet owner is greeted at the door when she returns at night; she has someone to sit on the couch with and share the television. There is someone she must shop for, feed and care for and who thus gives to her own life the paced, circular rhythm of family life. (Beck & Katcher 1996, p. 40)

There is no doubt that for many owners of companion animals, the bond they share with their animals displays a number of similarities with the bond they share with human friends and family members, in particular children. The strength of this relation, the human-animal bond, is increasingly recognised and acknowledged when various situations involving companion animals are addressed. However, many also point out differences in animal-human and human-human relations. Certainly, an uncritical comparison of the former with the latter is misleading.

The basis of the relationship is that humans decide to keep companion animals. Although some animals may seek the company of humans, and although some humans may arrange their lives to accommodate an animal, it is still within the power of the human to maintain or break the relationship – ultimately by selling the animal, placing it in a shelter or by having it euthanized. When someone decides to keep a companion animal, the animal's life (e.g. its food, housing and reproduction) will typically be controlled to suit human preferences. The status of companion animals as different from that of friends and family is also paramount in the relevant legal framework, since in law animals are generally seen as possessions – a status no longer had by any human individual.

Acknowledging this asymmetry between humans and animals in respect of power and legal status makes it clear that companion animal ownership is indeed a form of animal use. But where the outcomes of other

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forms of animal use, such as in food production or in animal experimentation, are obvious products (food or medicine), the outcomes of the use when it comes to companion animals are typically of a mental and emotional nature and therefore perhaps less noticeable. Less noticeable does not, however, imply less important. Using animals as companions may enrich the lives of humans in many ways, including bringing about better mental and physical health. Also, it must be emphasised that the unequal balance of power implied in the concept of “using animals” does not imply that owners of companion animals show disrespect or lack of concern for the well-being of their animals. Although he or she is the one with the power, an animal owner may still be very responsible, respectful and aware of the wants and needs of the companion animal.

Clearly, as the human-animal bond suggests, for many owners of companion animals animal welfare is a key issue: owners value their animals highly and do their best to provide them with good lives. Sometimes the animal will even enjoy privileges and be given a special status even at a cost to the owner’s own comfort or to the comfort of the owner’s human companions. But this does not mean that there are no issues concerning integrity and welfare for animals kept for companionship. The fact that many owners of companion animals feel that they respect their animals and have the finest intention to provide the best possible care does not guarantee that their actions raise no ethical problems; and, in fact, ethical problems concerning integrity and the welfare of companion animals may arise in a number of ways.

A first group of problems can arise because the lives of many companion animals are linked so closely to the lives of humans, i.e. because the owner and animal share the same lifestyle. This may mean that the animals get too much, or unhealthy, food, and not enough exercise, and that the animals become obese and suffer from obesity-related diseases such as diabetes. And because the root of these problems – lifestyle – is part of the human-animal relation, it may be difficult for the animal’s owner to change the situation. The owner may be faced with a choice between changing his or her own lifestyle to suit the animal’s needs or, if maintaining his or her own lifestyle, to provide one lifestyle for the animal and another for himself or herself; and naturally, this may change the nature of the human-animal bond.

A second group of problems relate to the surgical removal of healthy tissue for cosmetic reasons, convenience or to prevent potential medical problems in the future. Some may find that these procedures are a natural part of animal keeping, or of a breed’s characteristics, while others may perceive such procedures as a violation of the animal’s integrity. Others again may argue that such procedures are justifiable because they benefit the animal (e.g. docking the tail to avoid injuries, or neutering to avoid reproductive stress), or are simply necessary (e.g. neutering to control the population of cats and dogs or to reduce the risk of certain forms of cancer). Interestingly, different procedures may have different status: some procedures are illegal in some countries (e.g. cropping of ears, removal of vocal cords, and de-clawing), while others may be partly

legal (e.g. tail docking allowed for certain dog breeds only), and yet others may be performed on a routine basis with little or no questioning (e.g. castration and sterilisation). The issue of routine neutering will be discussed further below.

A third group of problems involve behavioural problems. Generally, these can be divided in two kinds. First, there are normal behaviours, which are unwanted by the owner (e.g. cats marking their territory with urine). Here attempts are typically made to suppress the behaviour through behavioural therapy or through medical or surgical intervention such as castration. The behaviours here will not necessarily be problematic directly for the animal, but the animal may be affected negatively if the owner shows anger or frustration when the behaviour is performed or if the modification involves unpleasant aspects from the animal's perspective. Second, there are abnormal behaviours. These may develop because the animal is bored or frustrated. For example, a dog might chew the furniture when left alone. One reason why such problems arise is that some people who decide to keep a companion animal are unaware of the animal's needs and normal behaviour. They may therefore have unrealistic expectations of the animal – both in terms of what it can offer and what is required to care adequately for its needs. Sadly, behavioural problems are quite common and although some animal owners spend a lot of time, money and energy trying to deal with them, many animals end up either in a shelter or euthanized as a result.

A final group of problems relates to the breeding of animals with hereditary defects. Some animal breeds carry genes that either predispose or determine the occurrence of certain illnesses. Some of these conditions have developed spontaneously, e.g. certain eye-defects, and through screening of animals and responsible breeding such illnesses can be bred out. Other conditions are, however, clearly related to breed standards, where the demand for certain features, such as short noses, flat faces, and deep skin folds, predispose the offspring to develop certain health problems. Furthermore, breed standards may prescribe certain mutilations e.g. docking of tails. Problems relating to breed standards may be difficult to handle as they are integrated parts of the human-animal relation. These animals would probably not exist were it not for the features that some people consider desirable.

In farm animal production economic interests may add pressure and be an obstacle to preventing or solving certain welfare problems. But there is, in principle, no reason why these problems cannot be avoided if only consumers, farmers and society are willing to pay the price in relation to costs of food, availability and environmental issues.

This contrasts with the keeping of companion animals, where the nature of the human-animal relation may serve to secure interest in, and a willingness to show respect and care for, the animals, as well as the economic means to back up the intentions. Thus the roots of the problems may often be ignorance, not neglect or deliberate behaviour. But, at the same time the human-animal relation may not only encourage

conditions that can jeopardise animal integrity and welfare; it may inherently stand in the way of preventing violations of integrity or the alleviation of animal welfare problems.

The special status of companion animals

Compared to other animals used by humans, companion animals are singled out and given considerable status. Although it is often said that what is today referred to as the “human-animal bond” is a modern phenomenon, archaeological findings suggest that the formation of strong human attachments to at least some animals is not at all new.

In fact animals have lived in close proximity to humans for thousands of years. Probably this coexistence originated in circumstances where this was of mutual benefit. For humans the keeping of animals such as horses and cattle had obvious benefits: The animals could provide both labour and food. Animals such as cats and dogs may not only have offered support on practical matters such as hunting, protection and pest control, but also on an emotional level as companions. In return, humans have offered animals benefits such as food and protection.

The living arrangements of humans and animals have changed dramatically over the past centuries. The boundaries in housing facilities for humans and animals have become more clear-cut. Distinctions between animal species reflecting their relation to humans have become more pronounced. Today, the keeping of companion animals differs from the keeping of farm animals in several ways. Farm animals are usually kept in large numbers, separated from the human household, as part of a business-like relationship, and identified individually by numerical labels (if at all). Companion animals by contrast are typically kept as one or few individuals, given names, and are part of a social relationship which may, at least on the human side, involve a strong emotional bond. And companion animals such as cats and dogs typically share a home with humans. Horses, while originally farm animals, have increasingly become companion animals. Although living in a separate housing facility, in many cases the relationship between humans and horses share features of the relationship between humans and animals kept for companionship. Thus it is the nature of the relationship, not the species, which identifies an animal as a companion animal.

In principle, animals of any species can be kept as companion animals, but dogs, cats and horses are by far the most common companion animals. Other animal species often providing companionship include rabbits, guinea pigs and parrots. The popularity of cats and dogs can be explained by a number of factors. Their size is unthreatening, yet they are large enough to be seen as individuals; they look cute and appealing; they can be house-trained, and their longevity permits the development of a strong relationship and a common history.

But probably the main factor, which is found in particular in dogs, relates to the social behaviour of these animals: they often exhibit unconditional affection, a playful nature and delight in the company of humans. Animals of these species have a well-developed ability to communicate with humans through body language, facial expressions and vocalisations and seem very capable of understanding the communication signals of humans. This ability to communicate facilitates both a portrayal of the animal as an individual and the formation of an emotional bond.

People keep companion animals for a number of reasons. For some, the animal offers a form of assistance. This motivation dates back to the first relations between humans and dogs, where the dogs joined in the activity of hunting. Today, dogs are still used for hunting, but they assist humans in other ways too: for example, they watch human property and help disabled people. The latter task is no longer reserved for dogs. Horses and other animals are involved, and the assistance offered may be of both a practical and a more therapeutic nature (in so-called animal assisted activities or therapies).

Animals may also be useful when raising children, teaching them about compassion and their responsibilities. Animals enrich the lives of many people by being a source of entertainment, sports activity, company, safety, or by facilitating social contact with other people – for example, when walking the dog, riding the horse, or participating in dog-shows, cat-shows and horseshows. Some people keep animals for purposes other than companionship – for example, as ornaments, or because the caring and keeping of the animals *per se* is of interest – not because they establish a bond or personal relation as such with the animals they keep. In these cases, the animals, typically fish, reptiles and snakes, are typically considered a hobby.

The popularity of keeping animals as companions has given rise to a substantial industry supplying feed and various accessories. Also the veterinary profession has developed dramatically to cater for the needs of an ever-growing number of companion animal owners. And in the entertainment industry companion animals often play central roles. The possession of one or more animals in the household thus seems to have become a norm: It is recognized as an element in at least one kind of ideal family. However, another development is taking place in parallel. The number of dogs and cats that are abandoned, euthanized or given up for adoption because they are unwanted by the owner seems to be increasing. And the question is what to do about these unwanted animals. Is it morally acceptable to end the life of an animal that is no longer wanted?

The value of the life of a companion animal

Imagine that a dog owner dies. The dog is young and healthy. The owner has no family or friends who can take care of the dog. What should happen to the dog? There seem to be two options: euthanasia or placing

the dog in a shelter for possible adoption. If the dog is euthanized there is a loss of life but no welfare aspect to consider. If the dog is placed in a shelter, it gets a chance of enjoying a long satisfying life, but it also runs a risk of living a less stimulating or even a miserable life, and it will perhaps be euthanized later anyway.

Probably all shelters make the efforts to re-home as many animals as possible and provide the best care they can for the animals they are housing. But the reality is that not all animals are re-homed and that some develop behavioural changes when they are housed in shelters over the long term. Some shelters choose to euthanize animals that are considered close to impossible to re-home, that have remained at the shelter for a long time, or are perhaps showing signs of being unable to cope with the situation at the shelter.

Often veterinarians in small animal practice and animal shelter staff are faced with requests for euthanasia of physically healthy animals. Results from a recent Danish survey of small animal practices suggest that almost 30% of dogs are euthanized for reasons other than old age and illness. The main reason for euthanasia of physically healthy dogs is behavioural problems, in particular aggression. Other reasons relate to convenience (e.g. lack of time), changes in the household (e.g. moving) or owner health (e.g. allergy) (Lund 2007).

The euthanasia of healthy animals conflicts with some people's beliefs about the value of the companion animal's life. Because of this, alternative strategies have developed within animal shelters for handling the problem of surplus dogs and cats. These shelters have so-called "no-kill" policies. For them, it seems, dogs and cats have a right to life and therefore should not be euthanized.

Two of the ethical outlooks explored in Chapter 2 present very different views of the value of an animal life: The utilitarian and animal rights views. These outlooks agree that it is important that animals have a good quality of life, but disagree over whether issues other than quality of life should be taken into account.

The *utilitarian* view insists that the sum of welfare is the only thing that matters. Lifespan as such is not an issue; nor is killing. The total welfare can be maximized in the animal population by increasing the well-being of an existing individual, or by prolonging the life of an individual whose life brings net gains in welfare, or by ensuring that if this individual is euthanized, another will take its place and lead an equally good or perhaps even better life.

In other words, according to the utilitarian view, both the quality and quantity of animal life matters, but individual animals are fully replaceable. This means, for example, that the important thing is that there is a happy dog in the Smith family, but that it is strictly irrelevant whether the happiness-contributing dog is the Smith's current dog or a new one. What becomes relevant in this context is whether the dog (whichever one) and the Smiths would be equally happy in either event. If the Smiths are very attached to their current dog, they will probably find the idea that the individual animal does not matter absurd. Their dog is not just any

dog, and it is obvious that it is this particular dog that matters. Although they may appreciate other dogs, their current dog cannot be replaced without loss by a new one. In other circumstances, however, it could be the right thing for the Smiths to have their dog euthanized and replace it with a new one.

Advocates of *animal rights*, by contrast, emphasize that the individual animal must be respected because it has a right to life. This view is closer to what many people, and in particular those who operate no-kill shelters would probably claim – namely, that animals are not replaceable. Those who take this view will urge that the loss of an animal's life cannot be fully conceptualised, ethically, in terms merely of a loss of welfare. Rather, in addition to welfare, value attaches to the animal's life *per se*. Each life, and hence every individual, has value in itself, regardless of the amount of welfare this individual enjoys or contributes to other individuals' lives.

Here it may be necessary to consider another view: The *relational view*. This ethical outlook draws attention to the status of the animal species or individual. In Chapter 2, the Disposapup Ltd thought experiment was introduced and discussed. This thought experiment highlighted the fact that certain kinds of animal treatment that are readily accepted by many people in relation to farm animals would not generally be considered appropriate when it comes to companion animals. This difference in the acceptability of the treatment of farm and companion animals can probably be explained by the human-animal bond. A grey area seems to arise in cases where the animal, besides being a companion, has a working or functional role which has been lost – for example, a dog that is no longer able to join in hunting, or a horse that is unable to carry a rider. Here the need to replace the functional value of the animal may, at least for some, make it more acceptable to euthanize and replace the animal.

For others, however, an animal's functional value does not necessarily excuse disregard for the value of its life:

When beagles or cats are used in laboratory research, militant animal liberationists are provoked to acts of mindless violence. Imagine the level of public outrage if it were disclosed that the government was subsidizing the factory farming of puppies and kittens. Indeed, the recent story of "The man who had to eat his dog to survive" occupied the entire centre page of one of Britain's major newspapers. The man who had to eat his pig to survive would scarcely qualify for a footnote. (Serpell 1986, p. 15)

Although some animal species, such as rabbits and horses, are comfortably regarded by many as both companions and meals, the eating of other animal species may be almost taboo in some cultures, if members of that species fill the role of companions. This is particularly clear in relation to the eating of dogs – a

practice which, in the Western world, is generally considered unacceptable, although dog meat consumption is not unusual in some Asian countries.

Thus, even if it were a matter of human survival some people, as is suggested by the quote above, would question whether the functional value of a dog can overrule the value of its life. The attribution of this status of dogs, and to a certain extent cats also, was clearly evident in a recent EU proposal to ban the trade of fur from dogs and cats. Several welfare concerns have been raised about the production of dog and cat fur. But even if these problems were solved, or at least reduced to a level accepted for other species, the overall objection to these products would remain: “As these animals are considered to be companion animals, their fur or fur products are generally not accepted for ethical reasons” (European Commission 2006).

Many people accept farm animal production and for them, it seems, most ethical issues about welfare and other matters raised in this context can be handled within contractarian and utilitarian frameworks. But, in order to address the issues brought up when it comes to companion animals, the animal rights and relational views often seem to be relevant frameworks. Interestingly, the concerns of some defenders of the relational view cover not only the individual animals people have formed relationships with, but any animal of the relevant species – e.g. not just their own dog, but dogs in general.

Returning now to the shelter example, a new trend underlines the significance of the human-animal bond: the emerging field of retirement homes and hospice care facilities for companion animals. An owner may choose to place an animal in such a home rather than having it euthanized when he, or she, can no longer look after the animal’s needs. An owner may choose this option when faced with his or her own death, to ensure that the animal is cared for instead of being euthanized. In doing so the bond between owner and companion animal in a sense reaches beyond the life of the owner.

Increasingly, it seems, aging and some level of disability or discomfort may be an accepted part of the companion animal’s life, a natural part of old age. In retirement or hospice facilities the necessary care, including pain relief, is provided for old and disabled animals. From an animal rights point of view, one could argue that animals have, in addition to the right to medical treatments, a right to age, to deteriorate mentally and physically, and (if not suffering) to die of natural causes. From a relational point of view, placing animals in homes mirrors what would be done to human companions and family members under the same circumstances. Although a dog may be old and unable to lead a “normal” dog life, it can still be part of a relationship with its owner. However, caring for the animal in the grey area between being “well” and “suffering” raises some questions about what constitutes a good life and when euthanasia is called for.

Veterinary treatment: Drawing the line

When perceiving companion animals as part of the family, some owners believe that the living standards and medical care of their companion animals should be similar to what is available to the human members of the family; and they are often willing to make financial priorities to ensure this if necessary. At the same time veterinary medicine has developed towards more specialised diagnostics and advanced forms of treatment. In many respects this is a welcome development, both for the owners of valued companion animals and for the animals themselves. However, problems may arise when animals are treated to the point at which some may question whether they should receive further treatment, finding it would be more appropriate to allow them to die. Furthermore, questions may be asked about veterinary treatments or “services” which are not really aimed at preventing, curing or alleviating diseases. The need to draw a line where veterinary treatment is concerned thus often involves consideration of the justification of treatment and whether the animal’s life is worth living.

The veterinary surgical procedures which probably affect most individual animals are castration and sterilisation (neutering). These procedures are carried out to mitigate uncontrolled breeding in dogs and cats, which may result in unwanted offspring subsequently perhaps living miserable lives and eventually being euthanized. There is, however, at any rate, in the larger cities, a tendency to keep dogs and cats under greater control by, for example, keeping cats indoors and away from potential mates.

Still, neutering is often recommended in any case, the idea being that it will also be in the animal’s own interest, as neutering may reduce the risk of some disorders (e.g. some forms of cancer) at a later stage as well as sparing the animal of the potential frustration of unfulfilled sexual behaviour. Behavioural changes following neutering may also make the animal more suitable for a life close to humans: It may be convenient for the owner to avoid the urine spraying of an intact male cat or the calling of a female cat in heat.

It can be asked, though, which kind of life is better for the cat: Being neutered and living a safe and calm indoor-life; or being left intact and allowed outdoors to fight, hunt and reproduce? In Chapter 3, three views of welfare – or quality of life – were presented: *Hedonism* (more pleasure than pain), *Preference-theory* (obtaining what is wanted), and *Perfectionism* (realising species-specific potentials). Answers to the question about what is best for the cat will clearly depend on which of these views is adopted. For the hedonist the indoor-life may be preferable, given that enough comfort and pleasurable stimulation is provided. Equally, the out-door life may be attractive, as long as it offers more pleasure from, say, hunting and mating than distress or pain from fighting. For the perfectionist, however, neutering inherently robs the animal of certain aspects of its natural behavioural repertoire; and keeping the cat indoors further reduces its opportunity to

realise its species-specific potentials. So where the adherent of hedonism may see both the neutered indoor and the intact outdoor life as positive for the cat, only the latter will be seen as positive by the perfectionist.

For some adherents of the animal rights view neutering and the keeping of animals indoors are morally problematic – both in terms of the actual removal of healthy tissue and any subsequent changes in behaviour and physiological development. This point holds, according to this view, regardless of potential gains in health and welfare for the cat. Adherents of a utilitarian view will only see the neutered indoor cat as a problem if the procedure, and the way of keeping the cat, cause the cat problems – or more accurately, more problems than benefits. For the utilitarian, then, the neutering and the indoor confinement are not in themselves problematic (see Chapter 3 for a more elaborate discussion about approaches to welfare and the case of neutering). Similar issues may arise in other contexts – for example, when considering the amputation of an animal's limb.

In addition, some veterinary treatments may present a clear conflict of interest between the animal and its owner. And although many veterinarians and animal owners appreciate the importance of increasingly specialised diagnostics and the advanced treatments offered in small animal practice, some less pleasant issues arise. As the animals cannot give verbal consent to the treatments offered, humans must act on their behalf. Sometimes they will decide to stop, or avoid, treatment even though more, at least in theory, could be done. But many owners of cats and dogs are strongly attached to their animals and in some cases they may find it hard to accept that the animal is terminally ill, incurable and potentially or actually suffering. Although they are made aware that euthanasia is an option, or even a recommended option, they may be reluctant to take this step, perhaps because it goes against their general ethical views, or because they simply find it hard to part with a beloved animal.

One kind of treatment that may be involved in this kind of situation is chemotherapy. Interestingly, this treatment option has been offered in veterinary medicine in some countries, like the UK and the US, for at least 20-40 years without giving rise to much discussion. In other countries, such as Denmark, chemotherapy has only recently been introduced and has caused a lively debate. Much concern has been expressed over the use of a treatment which merely prolongs life by a few months rather than curing the animal, and which has, potentially, significant side-effects. It has been said that the animal is kept alive for the sake of the owners, and that the animal would be better off being euthanized. Concerns such as these are, however, not unique to chemotherapy. Rather than regarding these arguments as arguments against chemotherapy as such, it therefore seems more relevant to consider them in the context of a range of veterinary treatments each of which raises the same issues. The theme of the discussion then changes from a matter of being for or against chemotherapy to cover a range of similarly problematic treatments offered in veterinary medicine. The main

questions to consider then become whether you should initiate a certain treatment just because you can, and if not, what criteria should be met before a treatment is applied or withheld.

Once a sick animal has been brought along to the veterinary clinic and a diagnosis has been made the veterinarian and the owner will need to consider treatment options. Sometimes this will be straightforward. The issues are simple, for example, when a dog is presented with a uterine infection (pyometra) that can normally be treated surgically with no serious side-effects and a very good chance of full recovery. In other cases the choice may be much more difficult. Thus with some forms of cancer the options only cover alleviation of symptoms, giving pain relief, euthanasia or not taking any (immediate) action. Here a number of factors might influence the decision made, including the owner's emotional attachment to the animal, his or her financial and practical situation, and the veterinarian's medical skills.

It is generally agreed that when a disease is incurable and euthanasia is, for one reason or another, ruled out efforts must be made to ensure that the animal has a reasonable quality of life during the remainder of its life. Obviously, the task then remains of determining what aspects of quality of life it is necessary to protect, and whether these can be protected to a satisfactory degree. Thus, in more complex cases, the veterinarian and the owner must first decide whether or not to initiate treatment; and if treatment is chosen although the condition is incurable, they must consider if and when it will be necessary to draw the line and euthanize the animal.

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