The use of the Reflective Equilibrium Method in teaching animal ethics and veterinary ethics

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Introduction

In all branches of veterinary practice – in companion animal, sport animal and farm animal practice – veterinarians are confronted with ethical issues relating to the human-animal relationship. The professional activities take place within a triangular relationship between animal owners, their animal(s) and the veterinarian. The veterinarian and the owner decide how to treat the animal by mutual agreement. Situations arise within veterinary practice that present the veterinarian with moral dilemmas; he or she feels uncertain about what is morally right to do in a particular instance.

Moral dilemmas in veterinary practice arise mainly on two levels: (1) on the level of the relationship between veterinarian and the owner, and (2) on the level of the relationship between the veterinarian profession and society. Moral dilemmas on the first level may be characterised as conflicts between interests of animal owners and the interests of the animals. The veterinarian ought to take into account both human and animal interests. Sometimes it is quite difficult to decide whose interests – human or animal – should take precedence.

Veterinarians do not only have to deal with animal owners. Society – including ordinary citizens, consumers, government, animal protectionists – looks critically at how veterinarians do their job and how they deal with their professional responsibilities. Moreover, the veterinary profession has been increasingly required to take a clear stance on particular ethical issues. In this field of tension of interests and expectations, individual veterinarians have to find their way. The dilemmas are often so complex that it is not always easy to determine a course of action or policy that is morally right.

Moral decision-making requires deep insight into moral reasoning. In seeking answers to moral questions, the Reflective Equilibrium Method of moral reasoning appears to be a suitable approach. This method is used in teaching veterinary and animal ethics to veterinary students at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Utrecht University (the Netherlands). I will provide an outline of both this course in animal and veterinary ethics and of the Reflective Equilibrium Method. Special attention is paid to moral principles that can be used to guide us in making judgements and decisions about ethical issues regarding animals.

Course in animal and veterinary ethics

One of the subjects of the veterinary curriculum at the Utrecht Faculty of Veterinary Medicine is ‘Veterinary Medicine and Society’. In this course, which is taught during the fourth year of the curriculum, particular attention is given to the ethical and legal aspects of the use of farm animals, companion animals and laboratory animals, to the ethical and legal aspects of the veterinary profession and veterinary practice, and to the legal aspects of veterinary public health care. More specifically, the subject Veterinary Medicine and Society consists of three parts: (1) Animal ethics and veterinary ethics, (2)Veterinary law and (3) Forensic veterinary medicine. The course in ethics consists of two parts: animal ethics and veterinary ethics. The most important teaching goal of animal ethics is to train students in practical moral reasoning and moral decision-making. Moral reasoning requires knowledge of ethical theories, norms, values and moral principles. Our approach is case-oriented, that is to say that different types of ethical issues regarding the human-animal relationship are discussed by the students in working groups.
Some examples of ethical issues discussed are: performing surgery on animals for non-therapeutic purposes, the use of growth promotors in farm animals, reproduction technology, biotechnology, the killing of animals, and the use of laboratory animals.

The course in veterinary ethics focuses on professional responsibility. The student has to understand what is meant by professional responsibility and gains insight into professional norms, values and attitudes and the different ethical codes of practice.

**The Reflective Equilibrium Method of moral reasoning**

In training students in moral reasoning and moral decision-making, we use the ‘Reflective Equilibrium Method’ (Van Willigenburg and Heeger 1989; Rutgers 1998). Moral reasoning according to this method implies a continuous interplay between moral intuitions (intuitive moral judgements or convictions), moral principles and morally relevant facts (figure 1). To reach a justification of a moral judgement in a moral case four activities are required:

- making explicit the moral intuitions one has with regard to the case;
- searching for possibly applicable moral principles and elucidating the case from the perspective of these principles;
- searching for the morally relevant facts of the case, that is to say, tracing features of the case, which are morally relevant in the light of intuitions and principles;
- balancing intuitions, principles and morally relevant facts until an equilibrium has been reached.

**Figure 1.** Moral reasoning along the lines of the Reflective Equilibrium Method
Moral principles

One of the actions we have to take is to search for applicable moral principles, elucidating the ethical issues from the perspective of these principles. Three fundamental moral principles have been elaborated with respect to our relationship with animals (De Boer, Brom and Vorstenbosch 1995, Rutgers, Grommers and Colenbrander 1996, Rutgers and Heeger 1999, Bovenkerk, Brom and Van den Bergh 2002):

1. the principle of non-maleficence;
2. the principle of beneficence;
3. the principle of respect for animal integrity.

The principles of non-maleficence and beneficence concern both humans and animals, while the integrity principle only refers to animals. According to the principle of non-maleficence, one should not inflict harm on living beings (humans and animals). ‘Harm’ is defined as pain, suffering, discomfort, illness and poor welfare. On the other side stands the principle of beneficence, according which one should promote the health and well-being of living beings.

As stated before, the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence deal with animal welfare. We must realise that animal welfare is a moral concept in the context of these principles. Animal welfare researchers use different conceptions of animal welfare to make it amenable to scientific study. However, animal welfare research only gets moral relevance when the relationship with ethics is made explicit (Tannenbaum 1991, Stafleu et al. 1996). This is possible by using a ‘bridging concept’ of animal welfare, which links scientific research to the ethical concerns about the welfare of animals (Fraser et al. 1997, Duncan and Fraser 1997).

The principle of respect for animal integrity is connected with the notion of ‘intrinsic value of animals’. This notion plays an important role in the Dutch animal protection legislation (Brom 1999). In the Dutch Animal Health and Welfare Act (1992), the intrinsic value of animals has been taken as an explicit starting point for the policy on human-animal relationships. ‘Intrinsic value’ means that animals have a value of their own, a value that is independent from their ‘instrumental’ value for human beings and that animals are not ‘mere things’. This implies that, for their own sake, the well-being of animals should be taken into consideration: we are obliged not to inflict suffering on them without sufficient justification. The phrase that animal have a value of their own also entails that moral consideration is due to animals since they have ‘inherent worth’ (Rutgers and Heeger 1999). This notion expresses that the animal’s intactness and its species-specific capacities and functions constitute a value towards which an attitude of moral respect is appropriate. Inherent worth is thus related to a basic attitude of moral respect, which can be described as respect for animal integrity (Rutgers and Heeger 1999). The principle of respect for animal integrity is a principle that reflects a sense of respect for animals beyond care for their health and welfare. Animal integrity is defined as the wholeness and completeness of the animal and the species-specific balance of the creature, as well as the animal’s capacity to maintain itself independently in an environment suitable to the species. According to this definition, respect for animal integrity implies that people should not interfere with the wholeness and completeness of animals, should not disrupt the species-specific balance, and should not deprive animals of the ability to maintain themselves independently in an environment appropriate to the species.

The principle of respect for animal integrity plays an important role when moral issues that go beyond animal suffering and well-being have to be resolved. Examples of ethical issues of that kind are biotechnology (cloning and genetic modification of animals), performing surgery on animals for non-therapeutic reasons (e.g. tail-docking, ear-cropping in dogs, removal of vocal chords in noisy dogs (‘debarking’), removal of the claws of destructive cats (‘declawing’), beak-trimming in chickens and ducks and dehorning of cattle, sheep and goats) and the use of reproduction technology in animals.

It must be emphasised that the concept of animal integrity differs from animal welfare concepts. Animal welfare has to do with feeling good and functioning well, whereas integrity relates to biological characteristics of the species in question. The criteria used in the assessment of animal welfare are different from those used to judge animal integrity.

It should be stressed that the principle of respect of animal integrity is not meant to replace the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, but to be used in addition to those principles (Rutgers and Heeger 1999). Since respect for animal integrity has a different meaning than caring for the health and welfare of the animals, the principle of respect has an independent position in moral decision making.
Discussion and conclusion
The moral principles of non-maleficence, beneficence and respect for animal integrity are intended to guide us in making judgements and decisions about ethical issues regarding animals. We can appeal to these principles in the process of ethical reflection according to the Reflective Equilibrium Method. Moral decision making according to this is a process of balancing moral intuitions, moral principles and morally relevant facts. Reflecting on an ethical issue along the lines of the Reflective Equilibrium method enables us to give a justification of our moral judgement about an ethical issue. The method provides us with a structuring of moral justification that closely resembles our day-to-day reasoning process when trying to reach a moral decision (Van Willigenburg and Heeger 1989). This makes the method attractive to use.

Moral decision making with the help of the Reflective Equilibrium method can only be fruitful if the following conditions are fulfilled. Firstly, moral deliberation demands openmindedness. The ‘ethical practitioner’ must demonstrate moral sensibility and responsiveness to moral facts. He knows what it means to judge on an ethical issue from a moral point of view. Secondly, knowledge of ethical background theories is required. It is also important that the ethical practitioner has an understanding of the relevant moral principles.

People can individually make use of the reflective equilibrium method when they are faced with ethical issues regarding the treatment of animals. In other words, the method is suitable for ‘intrapersonal deliberation’, but it can also be used as a model for intersubjective argumentation. When using the reflective equilibrium method as a model of ‘interpersonal deliberation’, considered judgements which are broadly supported can be reached.

References