1. The community of breeders and veterinarians - ethical approaches throughout history

In the course of history, different civilizations and cultures have had different codes of ethics for “animal professions”. To understand the current form and content of these codes of ethics, it is necessary to look back and analyse the opinions of different experts from ancient times to the present day. In the history of European civilization, the ethical/deontological views closest to those of modern husbandry and the veterinary profession can be found in Ancient Greece and Rome.

1.1. Ancient “animal ethics” and deontology records

The Ancient Greek civilization created a paradigm of man’s superiority and rule over the animal world. In Plato’s (427–347 BC) hierarchy of values, animals are situated far below man. The father of medical ethics – Hippocrates (460–377 BC) – did not mention animal treatment at all. In Ancient Greece, it was generally believed that treatment and medical practice were manual tasks and, as such, were not as highly regarded. Treatment of animals or descriptions of animal diseases were seldom mentioned by the great names of the epoch (Delebecque, 1978). Although Aristotle (384–322 BC) wrote about zoology and anatomy, as far as husbandry and veterinary treatment were concerned he only provided a fairly detailed description of castration. In his work On the art of horse-riding, Xenophon (c. 430–354 BC) only included a minor remark on horse treatment, and other authors did not expand on this (Tropilo, 2001).

In Ancient Rome, animals were categorised as objects created for human pleasure. However, we can find conflicting views, for example in his work De re rustica (On Agriculture), Columella (1st century AD) stated that an animal suffers in the same way as a person: Neque enim aliter hoc animal, quam muliebris sexus entitur, saepeiusque, etiam, quando est omnis
rationis ignarum, laborat in partu (“as a sheep does not give birth in any other way than a woman does, and often, though it is completely unaware of the reason, it suffers to the same extent during delivery”) (Kreyser, 1997).

Vegetius (5th century AD) referred to the pleasure humans can derive from having animals: “try to keep what we like in good condition”, he advised the Romans. He also mentioned the economic importance of animals. Aware of the established ancient hierarchy, in which animals ranked below humans and veterinary medicine below human medicine, he tried to upgrade the status of veterinarians by writing in his work Ars veterinaria sive mulomedicina: “…nam mulomedicinae doctrinae ab arte medicinae non adeo in multis discreopat, sed in plurisque consentit” (“animal treatment, in many of its aspects, does not substantially differ from medicine, and in many others it is identical”).

In his poem Georgica, Vergilius (70–19 BC) wrote that a shepherd cannot sit with his arms folded awaiting divine help, but instead has to provide adequate treatment himself when animals in his flock are ill (Rotkiewicz, 2005).

Desirable qualities and attitudes for veterinarians were specified as early as in ancient times. The above-mentioned Columella advised: “Let him be middle-aged, physically strong, experienced in agriculture or at least very caring and a fast learner, … as a man who takes care of cattle should be proficient in veterinary medicine” (Mediae igitur sit aetatis et firmi roboris, peritus rerum rusticarum aut certe maximae curae, quo celerius addiscat, … veterinariae medicinae prudens adde debet pecoris magister). As to his attitude, Columella prescribed: “… he should be alert, willing, diligent, eager, … so that he does not think he knows everything, and he will always be honest when he does not know” (…“sit autem vigilax, impiger, industrius, navus … nequid se putet scire quod nesciat, quaeratque semper addiscere quod ignorat”) (Kreyser, 1997).

The above-mentioned passages were not presented as paragraphs of a code; nevertheless, they paved the way for modern deontological regulations, drawn up by self-governing professional bodies.

1.2. The Middle Ages

A set of requirements for veterinary surgeons can be found in notes made by the Spanish veterinarian Francesco Balthasar Ramirez in 1629 (Rotkiewicz, 2005). His recommendations are reminiscent of current professional codes. It is interesting that many elements of these recommendations correspond to the prototype of medical ethics – the Hippocratic Oath included in the Corpus Hippocraticum:
• a good veterinary surgeon should above all be a doctor and should have thorough knowledge, which ought to be revised and refreshed;
• he should be a practitioner and possess numerous manual skills;
• he should assess situations and react quickly in the event of animal illness;
• he should be polite to an animal’s owner, even if the latter does not show self-control;
• he should not prolong the treatment process, either due to incompetence or for his own benefit; he should always be frank about the animal’s condition;
• he should work with other veterinary surgeons by consulting each case and exchanging experiences, as it is impossible for one person to know everything;
• he should observe the principles of tidiness and cleanliness, which are so important in veterinary operations.

In addition, this author mentions other traits that are desirable in veterinary surgeons: good manners, moderation in food and drink, modesty, concision, eloquence — not uttering any redundant words. He should not be greedy and waste medicine, but be economical with animal owners’ money. He should treat poor people’s animals for free. He should not be arrogant — boast about successful operations, speak ill of other veterinary surgeons or claim superiority over them. These suggestions remain valid today. Furthermore, they were written before any formal kind of veterinary higher education was established. The first veterinary school, set up in Lyon in 1762, trained medical students to monitor animal diseases that had spread to humans. This is why veterinary students were taught Hippocratiean ethics, which more or less became the deontological code for the veterinary profession over the course of time.

2. The modern ethics of “animal professions”

The origins of dilemmas in current codes of professional ethics for modern animal or veterinary sciences can be traced back to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859). According to this theory, humans should not be treated as an exception; evolution did not create better or worse life forms — each one deserves respect. During the Age of Enlightenment and Positivism, several experts spoke out against the cruel treatment of animals, their dehumanisation and their status as living things (Regan, 1983). From the early 20th century, the traditional view of the hierarchical structure of dependence: human, animal, plant, inanimate nature, seemed to lose its validity. The second half of the 20th century
brought an avalanche of new, quite revolutionary, views on the relationship between animals and humans.

2.1. A Christian outlook on “animal ethics”

The Church today defends the traditional metaphysics of man and nature inherent in the logic of Divine creation. Nevertheless, it also accepts the theory of evolution in the creation of life. In a publication by the biologist Richard J. Berry (1996), a code of ethics was accepted in which humans are persons but animals are not. Criteria for personhood are considered to be spirituality, culture and morality, characteristics which, according to this view, cannot be attributed to even an extremely clever animal (Spaemann, 2001).

According to Father Jerzy Brusilo — State Veterinary Priest in Poland — (2004), veterinary practice must have a reliable and stable foundation. It must assume concepts and principles of a paradigmatic nature and these can be found in the two initial sentences (preamble) of the Code of Veterinary Ethics and Deontology (2001) accepted by the profession:

“The veterinary surgeon’s vocation is to care for animal health and protect public health and the environment. The ultimate goal of all their activities is human welfare, as expressed in the principle Sanitas animalium pro salute homini.”

2.2. Animal personality traits and conscience; subjective experiences

Animals are reported to have subjective experiences in a number of biological studies (Jane Goodall and Francine Patterson) (Singer, 2003). They are defined as simple feelings, instincts and symptoms of rationality observed in the reactions of animals, which bear resemblance to simple human behaviour, for example attachment, longing, satisfaction and even anger. However, while wondering whether animals show personality traits or have experiences similar to human ones, we often forget common sense and see animals as rational creatures.

Prof. Michel Cabanac (1992) maintains that awareness in animals is of a transient nature. It appears and disappears, depending on the strength of risk factors present, and it can be trained and extended. It can also be measured. Animal awareness concerns, for example, the feelings of like or dislike towards a man in a dog, but also an iguana changing the colour of its skin or its body temperature.

Nevertheless, Konrad Lorenz (1975) concludes that: “from the point of view of cognitive theory, animals' subjective experiences should be considered as scientifically invalid, as they will remain just subjective experiences”. They do not translate conscience into complex human emotions, such as love, faith, heroism and also hatred.
2.3. Animals as subjects – utilitarian perspective

Utilitarianism is currently the most popular perspective when it comes to animal welfare issues. The father of utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham (18th century). In his view, the criterion for having moral status is the ability to experience pleasure and pain.

In the 1970s, R.D. Ryder (1980) coined the term ‘speciesism’. Like racism (where one race is considered superior to another), in speciesism one species (humans) is considered superior to other species (including animal species). Peter Singer rejects speciesism and defends a particular concept of equality between humans and animals. Singer accepts the principle of equality as a rational and moral basis for human relationships with animals. He formulated a new code of ethics based on five ‘commandments’, which replace those of traditional ethics (Singer, 1980). Instead of “Treat all human life as having the same value”, the first new commandment is “Accept that the value of human life can be changed”; instead of “Never intentionally kill an innocent human being”, he suggests “Accept responsibility for the consequences of your own decisions”; instead of the third principle of traditional ethics “Never take your own life and try to prevent the suicide of others” he suggests “Respect the wish to live or die of another person”; instead of the biblical “Be fruitful and multiply” he suggests “Bring only wanted children into the world”. And the fifth commandment — the most significant one in the context of our topic — suggests, instead of the “Always treat a human life as more valuable than an animal life” principle, “Do not discriminate on the basis of the species criterion”.

Singer’s postulates originate from the following three premises, which justify the equality of people and animals (Singer, 2003):

► **Self-conscience**, which is traditionally only attributed to humans, is, in Singer’s view, a broader concept than an awareness of what is happening or an expression of higher wishes. Following Singer’s principle of ‘equal consideration of interests’, self-conscience can be attributed to some animals. Valid evidence of self-consciousness has been obtained through research on apes by Jane Goodall and Francine Patterson. They observed a similar way of planning as in humans, suggesting an objective plan.

► **Rationality**, e.g. in using tools and language, is proven by the above-mentioned observations of apes. They can hear and utter sounds, although they do not possess the anatomical capacities for sound articulation; they can also learn sign language. In addition, their frequent advanced use of tools enables us to refer to the ‘rationality’ of some animals. By comparing higher animals to mentally handicapped humans, Singer
argues that rationality is an arbitrary, artificial line of division between humans (persons) and animals (non-persons). For example, a man can be a non-person and animals, such as apes and dolphins, can be persons. According to Singer, the attribution of personhood is merely a question of feelings and prejudices.

Perception of pain and experience of suffering, is a third level of Singer’s reasoning illustrating this problem. The simple conclusion is that animals have the same ability to feel pain and suffering as well as pleasure and satisfaction. These feelings should therefore be included in the moral assessment, regardless of whether they are felt by people or animals.

3. From scientific to practical considerations

The above-mentioned problem of animals’ ‘perception of pain’ or ‘experience of pain’ remains. Undoubtedly, many animals experience pain in the same reflex arches but the range of pain stimuli is reduced and this is shown when nerve impulses are analysed in a physiological way as in humans. They are characterised by the same polysynaptic structures: the receptors at each successive synapse relay the signal to the cortex thereby triggering defensive reactions. In humans, it is possible to determine the nature and the extent of suffering. In animals, however, it is only possible to measure pain reaction (Harrison, 1991). Humans can voluntarily accept pain as a sacrifice for others — this is a typically human trait (Brusilo, 2004). The extent to which pain in animals translates into a feeling of suffering is a question which remains unanswered.

3.1. The practical dimension of pain/suffering in animals – euthanasia

Both human and veterinary medicine consider the reduction (treatment) of pain and suffering to be one of their key aims. Local and general anaesthesia use an anaesthetic to switch off the physiological functions of nerve cells, starting with the most sensitive ones in the grey matter of the brain. A well-regulated dose helps to achieve the intended effect, including inhibiting the functions of the cells in the lower cerebral parts, the so-called vestibules of death — the respiratory and vasomotor centre cells. The state of euthanasia is then achieved.

The use of the term ‘euthanasia’ in veterinary practice is different from its use in the field of bioethics (where one of the conditions is that the patient makes an explicit voluntary request to have his or her life ended).
Is this ethical? From the point of view of feeling pain or suffering, it is nothing more than an analysis of nerve impulses in the upper layers of the brain’s grey matter, having switched them off pharmacologically. It is a widely accepted act performed by veterinary surgeons in line with present-day scientific knowledge. The animal in question does not feel pain, as its nerve cells are functioning beyond the physiological mechanism.

Euthanasia has long been performed in veterinary practice, being part of the ethical/deontological code of the profession. To date, ‘animal rights’ are not legally recognised. So, a veterinary surgeon putting down a horse with a broken leg or a dog with cancer seems to be tolerated. There is no precedent in veterinary practice of continuing treatment on a terminally ill animal or an animal in extreme suffering. Similarly, no one questions the preventive slaughter of thousands of animals infected with the BSE prion or the bird flu virus for example. These actions regulate farm and companion animal populations while protecting humans and preventing epidemics. In these cases, from a legal, moral and deontological point of view, the only proper course of action is to use an adequate method to induce euthanasia or slaughter the animal.

3.2. Geese liver fattening

A few years ago, poultry breeders were challenged by animal welfare activists who demanded a ban on the drastic methods used to fatten, mainly geese, livers. For years, some European countries have been force-feeding birds by inserting tubes down their throats and “foie gras” production has been driven by high consumer demand. However, few consumers consider the violent way in which the animals in question are fed. A recent example of Polish geese breeders shows how effective animal welfare lobbies can be. The above-mentioned procedure was well established at poultry farms in Poland and fattened livers were successfully produced. However, domestic consumption of these products was rather low and the majority of the products were exported. The breeders did not consider the moral aspects of cruelly force feeding the animals several times a day. Economic reasons were put before ethical argumentation until 2002, when a new law banned intensive fattening of geese.
4. Contemporary requirements for shaping the ethical attitudes of animal/veterinary science students and their future professions

4.1. Toxicological and hygienic aspects

Does industrial farming amount to any more than treating animals as objects? Currently, such farming practices are characterised by an intensive use of pharmaceutical products to protect and improve the breeding stock. Certain medicines are being produced in greater amounts for animals than for humans. Unjustified and inappropriate use of medicines, e.g. antibiotics, in animal nutrition and treatment has led to the development of some resistant bacteria strains in animal environments. Meat and other animal products containing harmful chemical residues endanger consumer health, mainly due to the risk of carcinogenesis. Monitoring them is a costly matter and is therefore not often considered for financial reasons. A veterinary surgeon is not only responsible for the health and life of animals but also for the health and life of humans. This is why one Belgian veterinary surgeon would not permit growth hormone stimulators to be used by breeders. The hormone mafia eliminated the doctor by commissioning his murder at the end of the 1990s.

4.2. Professional responsibility of veterinary surgeons – court ruling

Professional liability judges and veterinary medicine courts ensure that moral standards are observed in the veterinary profession. The area of ruling is very broad. The main topics include situations and circumstances for killing animals, conditions and acceptable methods of slaughter and also an assessment of animal welfare. Public opinion seems to be particularly sensitive to unacceptable veterinary surgeons’ behaviour in the above-mentioned areas. Animal owners often sue veterinary surgeons. The most frequent cases in Poland are related to misdiagnosis and inappropriate therapy (40% of claims). Other claims include misapplication of standards when reporting contagious diseases, failure to properly monitor slaughtered animals and their meat, and illegal use of metronidazole or anabolics (28%). Another 16% of accusations concern failure to observe the established hierarchy and inappropriate professional contacts in the inspection and veterinary chambers. Other offences concern dishonest advertising, offering veterinary services without real need, not helping a dog in shock after a car accident and immoral conduct of veterinary surgeons towards one another (Łapiński, 2004).
Independently of the professional courts, veterinary surgeons are, like every other citizen, subject to civil and criminal law.

4.3. The most recent ethical and deontological standards

Apart from national ethical and deontological codes pertaining to the veterinary profession (*Code of Veterinary Ethics and Deontology*, 2001), a veterinarian can make use of the collections of standards, principles and regulations recommended by international agencies. The *Code of Good Veterinary Practice* (2004), for example, was drawn up under the supervision of the European Federation of Veterinary Surgeons. It prescribes ethical principles in the following relations:

- veterinary surgeon – animal patient
- veterinary surgeon – his/her client
- veterinary surgeon – his/her profession/veterinary association
- veterinary surgeon – veterinary treatment substances (their safe use with no risk for human health or life)
- veterinary surgeon – his/her staff
- veterinary surgeon – public health safety
- veterinary surgeon – natural environment
- veterinary surgeon – authorities.

As the most frequent claims to professional courts involve veterinary surgeon – client relations (mainly due to misdiagnosis), veterinary services need to be of a certain level. Animal clinics, surgeries or hospitals can undergo an audit under the ISO 9001 certification system. It enables a high standard to be achieved and quality animal treatment to be performed. Such modern-day demands provide the veterinary profession with a new deontological code.

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