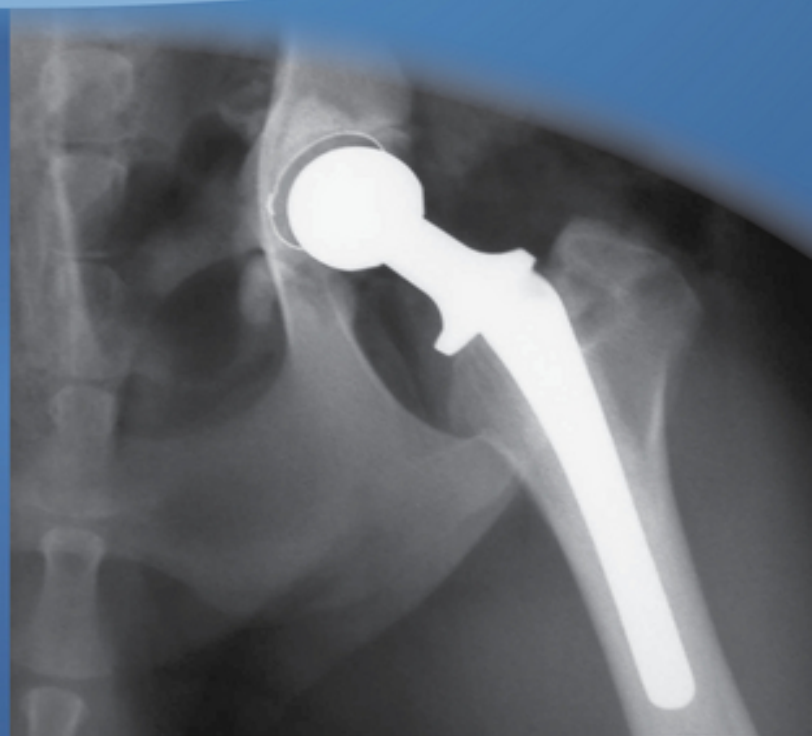


UFAW UFAW Animal Welfare Series

Companion Animal Ethics

Peter Sandøe, Sandra Corr, and Clare Palmer



WILEY Blackwell

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Sir Peter Medawar CBE FRS, 8 May 1957

Nobel Laureate (1960), Chairman of the UFAW Scientific Advisory Committee (1951–1962)

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Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead, Herts AL4 8AN, UK
Tel: 01582 831818 Fax: 01582 831414
Website: www.ufaw.org.uk Email: ufaw@ufaw.org.uk

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Companion Animal Ethics

Peter Sandøe

Professor of Bioethics, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Sandra Corr

Reader in Veterinary Surgery, University of Nottingham,
UK

Clare Palmer

Professor of Philosophy, Texas A&M University, USA

WILEY

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Editorial offices: 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK
1606 Golden Aspen Drive, Suites 103 and 104, Ames, Iowa 50010, USA

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Foreword

Humans have been domesticating animals and keeping some of them as companions for thousands of years. Over the past century, the industrialized Western world has seen a huge increase in the number of companion animals, especially dogs and cats; and this increase has been accompanied by a number of ethical and welfare issues specific to those companion animals. Those who keep animals as companions usually have no wish to harm the animals in their care, but the way we treat companion animals is, whether we like it or not, affected by both tradition and culture, and because humans and animals have for the most part evolved separately, compromises sometimes have to be struck between the best interests of the animal and those of the owner. So, how should individuals and society address these compromises? What ethical principles should we use to determine how to interact with companion animals? How do we decide what really matters and how we should treat companion animals? How do we decide whether new and sometimes painful or stressful treatments developed for humans should be used on companion animals? How do we deal with issues where a decision in the best interests of one companion animal impacts adversely on other animals whether in our control or in the wild?

The science of animal welfare has proven extraordinarily useful in providing the evidence to help us with such questions, but decisions on appropriate behaviour are ultimately dependent on society reaching a consensus on what should be done. This is where ethics helps make clear what the issues are, alerts us to the dangers of relying on custom and past behaviour and helps us to work through

the implications of adopting a particular ethical position. This is the first book that has set out to provide a comprehensive ethical analysis of this topic, and the authors are admirably placed to guide the reader through this forest, being eminent and respected in the fields of both ethics and the science of animal welfare. We are very grateful to them for undertaking the task and for providing us with this excellent and very readable account combining a synthesis of the existing literature and the authors' original perspectives on the issues. It will be an excellent addition to the UFAW/Wiley Series.

Robert Hubrecht

January 2015

Acknowledgements

In this book, we explore the important ethical questions and problems that arise as a result of humans keeping animals as companions who live with us in our homes. These ethical issues are not only important but also highly complex. To do justice to this complexity, we draw on a wide range of disciplines to underpin our arguments, including history, psychology, ethical and political theory, and the veterinary, behavioural and social sciences. In addition to incorporating a significant body of published research, we have also been greatly helped by our colleagues.

Four of these colleagues, Brenda Bonnett, Andrew Gardiner, Iben Meyer and James A. Serpell, have contributed so much, through advice and written input, to certain chapters that we have acknowledged them as co-authors of those chapters. We are immensely grateful for their contributions.

Many other friends and colleagues have given advice and/or have commented on specific chapters. In particular, we would like to thank Charlotte Reinhard Bjørnvad, Stine B. Christiansen, Lise Lotte Christensen, Björn Forkman, Merete Fredholm, Gail Golab, Ayoe Hoff, T. J. Kasperbauer, Sara Kondrup, Vibeke Knudsen, Helle Friis Proschowsky and Cecilie Agnete Thorslund. Special thanks are due to Geir Tveit for helping us to check the references and to Sara Kondrup for helping us make the index.

About 4 years have passed since we made the first outline for the book. Since then, working on the book has taken up a significant part of our time. While it has been enjoyable, it was also at times a struggle, due to conflicting

commitments. Much of the work has been conducted at odd hours, in evenings, on weekends and during vacations; this has been a strain on our family and friends, and we are grateful for their patience.

Finally, Peter would like to thank the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen for financial and other kinds of support that, among other things, enabled him to go to University of Pennsylvania for two research visits; he would also like to thank James A. Serpell for hosting him during these visits. Clare would like to thank Texas A&M University for a Faculty Development Leave in Autumn 2012 that allowed her some time to work on the book. Sandra would like to thank Professor Christopher Wathes (OBE) for encouraging and developing her interest in ethics.

Peter Sandøe

Sandra Corr

Clare Palmer

Introduction

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I.1 Introduction

Companion animals can be a source of pleasure, fun, exercise, comfort, fascination and consolation. Choosing to live with animal companions can be life enriching, even when it comes with some expense and inconvenience. Most of those who live with animal companions believe this to be a two-way relationship: as well as being fed and cared for, the animal companions also derive pleasure, satisfaction and comfort from living with people.

This seems, therefore, to be a win-win situation: what is good for people is also good for the animals; the animals are cared for, and they help to create human happiness. Put like this, there does not seem to be much need for a book on companion animal ethics. But things are not that simple. For instance, it is not always clear what is good for animal companions, and what is good for animals may be in conflict with what is good for the people with whom they live. Animal companions can also be the source of very different human responses than pleasure and consolation, such as anxiety, fear or distress. So, there is a need for ethical reflection regarding our relationship with companion animals.

In this short introductory chapter, we first elaborate on why we think there is a need for ethical reflection about companion animals and then explain our ethical approach. In the following section, we will try to explain what we mean by 'companion' animals and why we have chosen to focus on them, rather than on the wider group of pet animals. Finally, we will briefly outline the structure of the book.

I.2 Companion Animal Ethics

Even those who are well informed about veterinary and animal science and who have kept animals as companions for many years are sometimes unsure about what is in the best interests of their animals. Those without such knowledge and experience may be even more uncertain. For example, someone may be doubtful as to whether neutering is in the best interests of their male dog or whether their cat should be let out to roam. To complicate matters, popular ideas about companion animals' interests may not reflect the findings of current behavioural and veterinary research.

People may also find it difficult to balance potentially conflicting concerns for the well-being of their animals. If a dog or a cat is seriously ill, for example, due to a malignant type of cancer, an owner may find it difficult to weigh the interest of the animal in living (and their own desire for the animal to remain alive) against a concern to prevent their companion from suffering. This may lead to a dilemma between continuing veterinary treatment and euthanasing the animal. The owner may ask the vet for advice, but she or he may have similar doubts.

In other cases, different people may have strong and conflicting views about the significance of companion animals and how we should treat them. These conflicting

views are often rooted in different ideas about animals' moral status, whether there is something special about companion animal species and what we do and do not owe to them. For example, some people consider painlessly killing stray and feral cats and dogs to be ethically unproblematic. Others claim that healthy dogs and cats have a right to life, whether owned or not. Similarly, some people see no moral problem in docking dogs' tails to make their appearance meet breed standards, whereas others find tail docking a morally unacceptable violation of the dog's bodily integrity.

Thus, living with companion animals gives rise to *uncertainties* about what is in the animals' best interests, *moral dilemmas* in weighing different human and animal well-being concerns and *ethical disagreements* concerning the moral significance and appropriate treatment of companion animals. These uncertainties, dilemmas and disagreements are the subject of this book ([Figure I.1](#)).



Figure I.1 A 1-year-old cross-breed dog being carried in a 'Pooch Pouch'. In an accompanying article, the owner claimed that the dog loves it and it keeps him safe on the busy streets of New York; but critics claim the pouch is a 'fashion statement', which causes distress to the animals.

(Alberto Reyes/Wenn)

Despite the millions of cats, dogs and other animals kept as companions around the world, the ethical aspects of this unique relationship have not previously been the subject of a comprehensive ethical analysis. As a result, although the

ideas of animal welfare and the approaches to ethics that we discuss here are well established, the present book breaks new ground. In particular, previous work on animal ethics has tended to focus on higher-level theoretical questions, rather than on the more practical ethical issues that arise from our day-to-day engagement with the animals in our homes.

We believe that thinking through some of these everyday ethical issues – issues that can be incredibly important in individual animal lives, as well as our own human lives – is a critical step in developing and applying animal ethics. Partly because much of this material is new and cannot be taken for granted, and also for practical reasons of space, we have been selective in terms of the topics and frameworks we discuss. Consequently, there are omissions and places where we are, of necessity, somewhat brief. However, we hope that what is included will provide a useful resource and a starting point for future work.

This book, unlike many in the field of animal ethics, does not advocate any particular ethical position, beyond the widely accepted idea that the lives and experiences of sentient animals should count for something in our ethical decision making. We take a pluralist perspective, presenting a variety of approaches to human and animal welfare, to animal ethics and to particular ethical problems raised by companion animals. Although we, as the authors of this book, have our own (often divergent) views, we have attempted to present the arguments in a balanced way, though there may be places where we have not always succeeded in putting our sympathies to one side. We hope to show that at least some disputes about our ethical relations with companion animals may flow from different understandings of animal welfare or different approaches to ethics, but that – considered from those perspectives – they are at least comprehensible and rational.

This book draws on a wide range of supporting scientific material, particularly from psychology and veterinary, behavioural and social sciences. In order to ensure that this book is as informative and up to date as possible, we invited experts in relevant fields to join us in co-authoring several chapters, to improve the quality and accuracy of the empirical material we discuss.

I.3 Why We Use The Terms 'Companion Animals' and 'Owners'

Humans use animals in various ways, mostly linked to tangible outputs or services, such as for food or fur, riding, guarding or modelling human diseases. However, some animals are kept in people's homes where they appear to serve a less clearly defined purpose – typically these animals are referred to as 'pets'.

As Grier (2006: p. 8) comments, the term 'pet' has 'a complex history and obscure origins'. In the sixteenth century, 'pet' was used to describe both people who were indulged or treated as favourites and tamed animals kept for pleasure or companionship (Grier 2006: p. 9). In some cases, the term 'favourite' was also used for animals kept for human company.

Recently, however, the term 'pet' has become controversial, on the grounds that it fails to respect animals' own dignity or integrity. For instance, Linzey and Cohn (2011) argue that calling animals 'pets' is derogatory and insulting and that we should instead use the term 'companion animals'. The Companion Animal Welfare Council in the United Kingdom takes a similar perspective (CAWC, n.d.). Grier (2006: p. 10), on the other hand, while acknowledging these opinions, continues to use the term 'pet' on the

grounds that 'it is in wide use' and that people have a 'practical understanding of its meaning'.

In thinking about this book, we recognised the arguments on both sides: while 'pet' is the most widely used and understood term, we also accept that it may have demeaning connotations. However, we were persuaded by another set of arguments – that 'pet' and 'companion animal' are not straightforwardly interchangeable terms, but rather that we should think of 'companion animals' as a subset of those animals commonly called 'pets'. We take the term 'pet' to encompass a very broad range of animals alongside whom people choose to live and consider 'companion animals' to be a subset of 'pets', with whom we have a special interactive bond.

Let us consider this more systematically. Although the term 'pet' can be used in different ways, some features seem to be widely accepted as characterising the human/pet relationship. Grier (2006: p. 10) draws on Keith Thomas' characterisation of pets in England between 1400 and 1800: pets were distinguished by being allowed in the house, being given individual names and never being eaten. This is a useful starting point, although some animals widely regarded as pets, for example, fish in a tank, may well not be given individual names. Varner (2002) drawing on Barnbaum (1998) suggests a further set of characterisations, with which it is worth engaging.

First, Varner suggests, we expect a pet's owner to regard it affectionately. He seems right that this is normally the case – a 'pet' is not usually an object of hate, fear or disgust to its owner (in the way that, say, an invading cockroach may be regarded). Still, it would presumably be possible to keep a pet – say, a snake or a stick insect – because one is fascinated by it or curious about it, rather than because one felt affection for it.

Second, Varner suggests, a pet should live in or close to the home (this was also part of Thomas' characterisation of a pet). To rule out plants, Varner adds that for something to be a pet, it should be mobile, and thus, either voluntarily choose to remain in the home or be prevented from leaving. We decided to restrict our definition of 'pet' still further, to animals that actually live *in* the home, thereby ruling out horses.

We recognise that some readers will see the exclusion of horses as a significant omission from the book. While some people do regard horses as pets or companion animals, and they can be kept near to (though very rarely in) one's home, they also to a very large degree have other roles. Firstly, for many people, horses are primarily kept for sport. Secondly, the keeping of horses is still in many respects linked to an agricultural context. For example, in many places, even in industrial Western nations, often *the very same* horses that are kept by private individuals are eventually slaughtered and used for human or animal food. So, although there is much to be said about horses and ethics, we will not say it here.

Third, Varner proposes, a pet must be the kind of being that lives a life different in kind from the owner, in terms of its capacities, occupations and so on; this rules out keeping another human as a pet.

Fourth, a pet should have interests – its life can go better or worse for it; it has a welfare or a good of its own – and it should depend in significant ways on its owner to help fulfil those interests. So, a pet cannot be a robot, such as a Tamagotchi, which cannot, for instance, have 'poor welfare'.

Although this characterisation of a pet rules out plants, pests, human beings and robots, it includes most animals voluntarily kept by people in their homes: mammals, birds,

fish, reptiles, amphibians, insects and arachnids. While keeping such animals as pets certainly does raise ethical issues, the focus of this book is narrower: we are interested in animals kept primarily as companions. Even if one has affection for one's pet tarantula, it is, as Varner (2002) notes, a stretch to call it a companion. Insects and fish, likewise, may be kept for many reasons, but rarely primarily for their companionship. As argued by Varner (2002: p. 452), while a companion animal has all the characteristics shared by pets, it has additional characteristics that make it more than a pet.

However, this raises questions about what we mean by 'companionship'. Likewise, there is no generally accepted definition of 'companion animal'. The US-based animal welfare organisation, the ASPCA (n.d.) somewhat circularly defines companion animals as 'domesticated or domestic-bred animals whose physical, emotional, behavioural and social needs can be readily met as companions in the home, or in close daily relationship with humans'.

What seems critical to this definition is the emphasis on relationship and reciprocal engagement. Varner (2002) takes the term 'companion' to imply a 'significant degree of social interaction' between the owner(s) and the animal. Although somewhat vague, this involves humans and animals recognising and responding to one another as specific individuals (rather than, for instance, a fish swimming to the top of the tank to pick up food thrown in by anyone). For humans, companionship normally includes seeking out the company of the particular animal for comfort, consolation, play and so on, and this is likely to be reciprocal in the case of companion animals.

We take this kind of reciprocal engagement to be the hallmark of human/animal companionship, and as the vast majority of the animals with whom we have such mutual