

Moral limitations concerning the use of animals on social media and the role of the veterinary professional

by

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Abstract

This thesis reviews the practice of using animals for social media purposes from the perspectives of utilitarianism and the animal rights view, and discusses the responsibility veterinarians have in this context. The positions of both theories with regard to this practice of animal use are made clear using relevant normative and empirical arguments. This analysis is combined with the input from semi-structured dialogue sessions on the subject. These dialogue sessions show how people seemingly hold beliefs which are exclusive to either one of the theories simultaneously. The undesirable consequences of this are subsequently discussed, and arguments against ideal theory are refuted. This leads to an argument for choosing one particular ethical theory which ought to be followed when faced with any moral problem, including that of the ethical use of animals on social media. The decision which ethical theory this ought to be is reached by using the outlined utilitarian and rights perspectives on the moral issues central to this thesis to consider what accepting either theory would mean for how veterinarians ought to act. By appeal to our considered beliefs, the animal rights view is acknowledged as superior. Based on the animal rights view, the moral duties of veterinarians in the context of using animals for social media purposes are discussed. Finally, suggestions are made on how the current veterinary education system should change to adequately equip veterinarians to be able to fulfil the duties which result from an animal rights perspective.

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Introduction

With the advent of the internet in 1983, a new digital environment was created, which was soon filled with people sharing their lives through the use of social media websites. The first of these websites launched in as early as 1997, called “SixDegrees.com,” which although ahead of its time already attracted millions of users.¹

Today, the number of users on social media websites such as Facebook and Instagram, where sharing pictures and videos over the internet is the norm, is over a billion.² Perhaps unsurprisingly, pictures of dogs and cats play a major role in the visual economy of the internet (often called “cute economy”).³ On Instagram, “#dogsofinstagram” and “#cats” are the 49th and 51st most popular tags, respectively, with both hashtags corresponding to over 240 million individual pictures of animals.⁴

The popularity of animals on social media is of such magnitude that people not only create social media accounts for themselves, but specifically for their pets as well. Many of these accounts displaying pets have hundreds of thousands, if not millions of followers, with the account of “Jiffpom” the Pomeranian having reached an audience of over 10 million people in June 2020.⁵ On Jiffpom’s Instagram account, the dog can be seen wearing many different articles of clothing, seemingly enjoying donuts and coffee, while often being posed in handbags or sitting on chairs, with captions reading their supposed inner thoughts (Figure 1). Furthermore, at the moment of writing this, an official wall calendar with pictures of Jiffpom is being sold for \$14.99.⁶



Figure 1. A picture from the “Jiffpom” Instagram account.⁶

Virtually all of the major practices that routinely use animals have been subject to much needed critique from one or more ethical frameworks, most notably the farm animal industry, lab animal industry, and the practice of hunting and trapping.^{7,8} Yet, thus far, the use of animals on social media has escaped much scrutiny of this kind. Many other practices that routinely use animals have proven to be in need of moral limitations, including the closely related practice of using animals as actors in films.⁹ This gives ample reason to suggest that the practice of using animals on social media may equally be in need of normative discussion. Questions should be addressed which do not concern themselves with how animals *are* used for social media purposes, but how they *ought* to be treated. This moral problem in turn depends on more specific moral questions. An important example of such questions is whether the welfare of the animals whose footage is taken is negatively impacted by placing animals in possibly stressful situations. Other important questions may be whether the inherent value of the animal is being

respected, whether the tendency to anthropomorphise animals could erroneously shift the view and treatment of animals, and whether animals themselves have any right to privacy. To be able to answer these questions in a way that is for everyone clear, understandable, and action-guiding, an ethical discussion on the subject is required. However, despite the frequency and intensity with which the practice of posting footage of animals on social media has been performed over the past few years, little to no discussion on the ethics of it has taken place. Of all people who may be concerned with this issue, one of the most crucial may be veterinarians. Society nowadays knows many occupations that are seen by pet owners as authority figures concerning how animals should be treated. Of these professions, veterinarians are experts on the subject of not just animal health, but also animal welfare in general,¹⁰ of which animal behaviour is an integral part.¹¹ This places veterinarians in a position in which they have a unique overview¹⁰ of many of the ethical considerations relevant to actions that are performed concerning animals. The veterinarian's position therefore comes with the difficult task of continuously weighing the often conflicting interests of multiple parties (e.g. those of the animal, the owner, society, etc.). Veterinarians are asked by society and owners of animals to weigh these interests and to give recommendations as to what action not only can, but *ought* to be taken. This places an important moral responsibility on veterinarians.¹² To be able to correctly make such moral judgements, normative ethical theory is required. Ethical theories should provide moral agents with rational, non-arbitrary, impartial, consistent, universal, action-guiding principles anyone can follow to come to an ideal moral judgement when faced with virtually any moral challenge.^{13,14} Though many different ethical theories can be found in literature, not all of them meet these criteria for what a good ethical theory should be. Two ethical theories that do meet all of these criteria are utilitarianism and the rights view. These two ethical theories will therefore be used as a starting point in this thesis to evaluate the practice of using animals for social media purposes.

This thesis will provide veterinarians with the necessary information needed to make well-informed moral decisions when it comes to the relatively new and unexplored area of the practice of taking and posting footage of animals on social media. To this end, the overall research question of this thesis is how ethical theory can help veterinarians to define moral limitations, if any, to the use of animals for social media purposes in order to achieve ethical practice.

Before embarking on this endeavour, it is important to stress that this thesis starts in the background assumption that keeping animals for companionship is morally acceptable. Note that I make this assumption for reasons of feasibility rather than as an affirmative or self-evident answer.

Methodology

To answer the research question, desk research was performed combined with methods from social sciences.

To establish which ethical orientations are most prevalent when people in today's society make normative judgements on the practice of using animals for social media purposes, semi-structured dialogue sessions on this topic in the form of focus groups were organized. The focus groups consisted of a mixed audience of three to seven participants per focus group, who were both individuals originating from the general public as well as professionals who had varied associations with different sectors in the animal industry. None of the participants were researchers themselves. In each of these focus groups, a 90 minute dialogue between the participants was structured around a case describing a Twitter account with 38.6k followers dedicated to posting footage of a dog and a cat. The dialogues were led by moderators, who first asked more general question to the groups for them to discuss, before steering the

conversation to more in-depth matters. This to ensure that all relevant ethical considerations the participants might have were brought to light. The session and the relevant arguments were documented. I analysed the responses of the participants while having prior knowledge of ethical theory from my education as a veterinary medicine student, as well as from additionally reading multiple books and papers on ethical theory.

Based on the above listed criteria for a strong ethical theory, the accounts of utilitarianism and animal rights theory seem to be two strong candidates that can satisfy these criteria. Therefore, based on a literary study, the next sections present an analysis of the use of animals for social media purposes from both ethical theories. This analysis functions as the basis for mapping out limitations with regard to the ethical use, if possible at all, of animals for social media purposes.

Utilitarianism on the use of animals for social media purposes

The first ethical framework which we will use to review the practice of using animals for social media purposes is utilitarianism. When considering the morality of an action, utilitarianism places all the moral weight on the pleasures and pains that result as a consequence of that action. In this consideration, pleasures and pains are counted equitably, regardless of the race, sex, or species of the individual experiencing them.¹⁵ This means that the pleasures and pains of both human and nonhuman animals are given equal consideration.

How does the total of aggregate pleasures and pains determine the morality of an action? This is reflected in utilitarianism's core moral principle: the utility principle. For a utilitarian, it is not enough to merely take all pleasures and pains into consideration when reviewing an action. Neither is it their intention to simply bring about *more* total pleasure than total pain. What one ought to do, on the utilitarian's account, is to always bring about the overall *maximum* amount of happiness and the overall *minimum* amount suffering with *every* action. In other words, to bring about the *best* aggregate happiness/suffering balance.

How to evaluate animal welfare

Welfare is a concept that is inextricably tied to pleasure and pain, and is often used in reference to it, giving us cause to further examine it before continuing. However, what is meant exactly when speaking of "animal welfare" has been a topic for debate.¹⁶ In the following, the position will be used that animal welfare is, in essence, the quality of life as experienced by the animal.¹⁷ This means that animal welfare is not a concept that says something *about* the total of pleasures and pains an individual experiences, nor that it is a concept *adjacent* to this, but that welfare *is* in fact the total of an individual's pleasures and pains at any given moment. This means that animal welfare entirely falls under the ethical concern of utilitarianism. Other conceptions of welfare, especially animal welfare, are less accurate because they trade off that accuracy for practicality. After all, the mind of another individual is difficult to know.^{11,16} And the mind of an animal, who does not communicate through human language, even more so. To be able to make assertions about animal welfare more correctly, others have tried to limit the concept to biological functioning,^{16,18} ability to express species-specific behaviour,^{16,18} freedom of negative stimuli (e.g. the five freedoms), and ability to adapt to an environment so that the animal reaches a state it deems as positive.^{16,18,19} Even all these other conceptions taken together may be unable to encompass all factors that are relevant to the welfare of an animal. However, they certainly are useful concrete criteria which we can use to review how the practice of using animals for social media purposes affects animal welfare. Of course, utilitarianism requires us to consider *all* pleasures and pains, meaning *everyone's* welfare, to be able to elucidate what moral limitations would be needed to ensure ethical practice. It will be that action which in this matter will be shown to maximise total aggregated welfare that the utilitarian is obligated to

perform. However, the welfare of the individual animal whose footage is taken to be posted on social media will be a good starting point.

Taking footage of animals and its direct influence on animal welfare

Let us first review the practice of filming animals in its own right. We can divide this practice into four broad categories:

The animal being

1. unaware of being filmed and not manipulated
2. aware of an action being performed by the photographer whilst not being manipulated
3. spatially manipulated
4. otherwise manipulated

The animal being unaware of being filmed and not manipulated

In the first case, consider the following: Footage of an animal is taken, without the animal being in any sense aware of this, nor being in any sense manipulated for this purpose. The animal is leading its regular life, be that in the wild or as a pet. It just “happens to be” recorded on camera. It is difficult to see any utilitarian objecting to this practice (though we will have occasion to in the rights view section). The mere act of filming an animal does in and of itself not detract from its welfare directly. And since we have already made the assumption that it is not immoral to keep an animal as a pet, the welfare of a pet leading its normal pet-life is not considered to be negative, in normal cases. Therefore, on the utilitarian account, there is nothing wrong with the practice of taking footage of animals in this way if one wishes it.

The animal being aware of an action being performed by the photographer whilst not being manipulated

Now let us go one step further, and consider cases in which the animal is indeed aware it is being filmed, though nothing is done to it. By this I do not mean that it has any concept of what it means to be recorded, or indeed, has the concept of what a camera is. I merely mean that the animal is made aware of an activity started by the photographer which it is now a part of. This can be communicated in a variety of ways. The photographer might hold the camera in front of the animal, or call out to the animal to make it look in a certain direction, or speak while filming to attribute thoughts the animal might have at that moment and vocalize them on camera. In other words, behaviours not done *to*, but *around* the animal, that the animal becomes aware of, which would not have been performed had a camera not been on.

None of these examples affect the biological functioning of the animal, nor do they prevent the animal from displaying natural behaviours. But what about the internal experience of the animal, i.e. its feelings and emotions? As mentioned earlier, this is very difficult to interpret. Logically, the way to assess this differs from case to case, from individual to individual, and from moment to moment. For example, pets whose owners do this more often might get frustrated sooner, or they might have gotten used to it more and therefore not mind as much. Some pets may like the attention they receive, while others might prefer to be left alone. An important factor here is also the difference in temperament inherent to different species, e.g. cats being more solitary animals than dogs. Furthermore, an animal may at any point simply just not “feel like it.”

Whether these types of actions detract from the animal’s welfare depends on the context. It is therefore up to the photographer to gauge how the animal feels about the action being performed in the moment. This is not an easy task, because the methods animals use to communicate their (dis)pleasure are very different from human communication, are often too subtle for humans to recognize, and even if they are recognised as communicative signals, are often misinterpreted.²⁰

Owners are generally ignorant of how body postures, vocal expressions and visual/olfactory marks from animals are meant to convey a specific message. We will have occasion to elaborate on this when discussing the role of the veterinary professional.

Animals being spatially manipulated

What about actions that go beyond merely drawing the attention of the animal? There are a number of actions that fit this description.

One example is putting an animal in places they would not (or could not) have chosen to be in themselves. This could mean placing animals on chairs, on tables, in handbags, or simply keeping them longer in the same spot in front of a camera than they would otherwise have been. In these situations, the biological functioning of the animal is not impaired. One may argue that it could interfere with the ability to display natural behaviour, but this would only be the case if the animal were being manipulated this way for a prolonged period of time, say, for many hours. This would interfere with its ability to adapt to its environment. For example, when the animal starts to find its position or surroundings to become unpleasant, which is likely to occur after hours of being in the same place or position, it would be unable to reach a state which it considers to be positive. Granted, keeping an animal in a specific place for such a prolonged period of time is most probably not routine practice for anyone taking footage of an animal.

The question that remains, then, is how an animal would *feel* about these manipulations. Once again, it would seem that this depends heavily on the individual animal. Some animals might like to be put on chairs, or in handbags, which are places they wouldn't be able to normally reach themselves, though they might want to. In general, the same contextual considerations as mentioned above apply. The conception of animal welfare that places weight with their ability to adapt to their environment is helpful here.¹⁸ Since animals oftentimes will need to be handled to be put in these unusual places, they will also not be able to leave the situation they have been placed in on their own, nor may they be allowed to. Animals being unable to reach a state they deem as positive increases the likelihood for frustrations to arise.

Animals being otherwise manipulated

Finally, let us consider some miscellaneous manipulations of animals that are often seen on social media, which may go accompanied with welfare implications.

Firstly, the practice of putting animals in clothes. This often decreases their mobility, causing them to walk around less easily, or it may irritate their skin, whilst making it difficult for the animal to scratch themselves. It is interesting to note the difference in perception people have of pets wearing clothes compared to pets wearing cones, which both restrict their mobility. The latter are often pitied, while the former are not. Indeed, pets wearing clothes are usually not thought of as unhappy to be wearing them at all. Many people believe that the animal *likes* to wear clothes, looks “cute” for wearing them, and may even think the animal *feels* “cute” or “pretty” by wearing clothes. This is not to say that an animal *cannot* like to wear clothes, but merely to illustrate that the perception and interpretation of how animals feel about wearing clothes is subject to some heavy anthropomorphism, in this case most probably erroneous ones, which we will have occasion to return to in the next section.

Secondly, there is the practice of having animals perform tricks on camera. In contrast to the manipulations we have discussed thus far, this is a manipulation that actually asks an animal's *active* participation. However, this also means that it is easier for an animal to *refuse* to participate if it is unwilling. Whereas an animal is often unable to remove an article of clothing themselves, and thus has no choice but to wear it until the owner decides to remove it, being able to refuse to do a trick leaves room for the animal to adapt to its environment. Although its required active participation makes the manipulation severe, the animal's freedom to choose to

not participate means that there is minimal risk of the animal's welfare to be negatively impacted by this action, *so long as the animal indeed has the freedom to refuse*.

We have now completed assessing the implications that taking footage of an animal for social media purposes has on their individual welfare. We see the difficulty of making accurate assessments of the pleasure and pain an action brings about. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the mind of another individual is difficult to know, especially if the individual belongs to a different species. However, it is of crucial importance in determining the morality of the above described practices. One ought to endeavour to do this to the best of their abilities. Suffice it to say for now that there is nothing *obviously* wrong with the actions considered that at most merely draw the *attention* of the animal, on the utilitarian's account. However, as we have seen, some actions have a greater risk of negatively impacting animal welfare, usually corresponding with the level with which the animal is manipulated and/or is deprived of the freedom to not participate. It is especially these actions that ought to be assessed more thoroughly, and perhaps more conservatively, before choosing to perform them. Not only is the chance of an erroneous appraisal greater, so is the potential severity of negative consequences to animal welfare that this error might bring about.

The consequences of posting footage of animals on social media

We have talked extensively about interpreting the internal state of animals. When doing so, one would do well to consider whether erroneous anthropomorphisms are being made. This is especially relevant to the other parts of our utilitarian equation: the welfare of all others affected as a consequence of an action.

An anthropomorphism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the attribution of human personality or characteristics to something non-human, as an animal, object, etc.”²¹ In the scientific community, the definition is often appropriated to not just human characteristics, but characteristics that are *exclusively* human. This dubs any anthropomorphism as factually erroneous.²² However, with this appropriation comes the risk of *a priori* rejecting shared characteristics between animals and humans, a term which has been dubbed “anthropodenial.”²³ Therefore, we will be using the word “anthropomorphism” according to the official definition, thereby not treating it as being an error per se. If an anthropomorphism is indeed erroneous, this will be explicitly stated.

Horowitz & Bekoff (2007) claim that given the difficulty of assessing an animal's internal state, anthropomorphisms may be useful in helping to interpret their behaviour.²² Indeed, considering the vast number of similarities between humans, other mammals, and many other species, it would be unparsimonious to not attribute a characteristic that is found in humans to animals, in many cases.⁸ For example, we know that a knife entering our bodies would cause us pain, and since we have no reason to believe other mammals would *not* feel pain when being stabbed with a knife (indeed, we have all the neurological science in support), it ought to be assumed that animals feel pain as an internal reaction to the same stimulus as well. In today's society, in contrast to Descartes' time,⁷ almost no one would deny this. Nevertheless, many anthropomorphisms are ultimately inaccurate,²² or simply wrong. A prime example would be that of the owner who believes their dog has a “guilty expression” after breaking furniture. This means the dog is seen as being aware of wrongdoing, and therefore culpable. Since this is empirically proven to not be the case, these dogs are subjected to wrongful punishment due to an erroneous anthropomorphism.²⁴ To make matters worse, people often make anthropomorphisms concerning animals when there is ample reason *not* to assume the relevant characteristic is shared across species.

There are other, less obvious consequences to erroneously anthropomorphising animals. The way in which animals are framed on social media changes the way people perceive them.²⁵

Examples of erroneously anthropomorphising animals are placing them on chairs, putting them in front of human food as if they were eating it, having them wear clothes, and attributing captions of human thoughts to them. By erroneously (over)using anthropomorphisms, the otherness and uniqueness of animals is increasingly less recognized.²⁶ Not every experience that is of importance is necessarily one that humans can experience. To assume so is to run the risk of imagining animals less complexly than they are, and to thereby misunderstand the effects human actions may have on them. For example, because of the more sensitive auditory and olfactory senses of many animals, they may experience a richness to the world that humans are simply not capable of neither experiencing nor imagining.⁸ Because other mammals tend to use similar senses as humans, pet owners may come to believe that their dogs or cats suffer, for example, from loud noise at the same decibel level as them, or from stench at the same strength of odour. To fail to recognise that some animals might be some sensitive to the same stimulus as people are, animals can be caused undue suffering.²⁰ Moreover, animals often communicate with each other through scents, such as through marking behaviour, in contrast to humans. The failure of people to recognize uniquely animal forms of communication exacerbates miscommunication and thereby misunderstanding between humans and animals.²⁰ Without recognition of the ways in which animals differ from humans, this ignorance may cause people to act in ways that negatively impact animal welfare. The frequency with which erroneous anthropomorphisms are made exacerbates this.

There are ways in which the human tendency to anthropomorphise has already created serious welfare problems for animals. A prime example would be the state of current dog breeds. Brachycephalic breeds, renowned for their often severe respiratory health problems, have become popular in large part because of the fact that the shorter their snouts are, the more their heads get the anthropomorphically flat shape similar to a human face.²⁰ This is seen as “cute” by owners, in the same way a human baby is. One study found that over half of the owners of dogs diagnosed with brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS) did themselves not think their dog was suffering from breathing problems, while they were.²⁷ There is even evidence to support that people might *prefer* owning pets which are in some way physically or mentally unhealthy.^{28,29} A possible explanation may be that caring for these animals is more rewarding, since they are more in need of this care than their healthy counterparts.³⁰ The twisted irony is that it was us humans who created the need for this care in the first place. The consumer dictates the market by purchasing these unhealthy dog breeds and further promoting them by posting footage of them on social media, and contributes to the lack of acknowledgement of the suffering of these animals by subjecting them to even further anthropomorphism.

It is obvious that the aesthetic of pets, their perceived beauty, or “cuteness,” brings joy to people. This is also evident from Maddox’ (2020) study on reasons why people post pictures of animals on Instagram.³ In this study, participants mentioned that they saw footage of animals on social media as a uniquely “pure” corner of the internet, counterbalancing a great amount of negativity in the world and online. The study also found that posting pictures of one’s pets on social media is sometimes seen as “performative work,” or even as a digital expression and representation of the “extended self” of the owner.³ People may take pride in what they consider to be their performative work, and self-expression is a signifier of success in the process of self-realization.³¹ These are strong arguments for why posting footage of animals on social media increases the happiness of both the people who post the footage as well as the people who view it.

Nevertheless, there is also evidence that suggest that using social media makes people *unhappy*.^{32,33} Therefore, a counter argument to these positive aspects may be that although the footage of animals may bring joy in itself, this helps to keep people on social media sites for an even longer period of time. This exposes them more to the different facets of social media

platforms that make them unhappy, which may result in even more net suffering than happiness. There are a lot of assumptions being made in this line of reasoning, however, so in what follows, this stance will be disregarded. Nevertheless, it is a line of reasoning with serious implications for the utilitarian moral assessment that therefore warrants further investigation in order to obtain the necessary empirical data to either confirm or refute it.

The utilitarian endpoint

The utilitarian theorist considers an action to be moral if and only if it maximises total happiness and minimises total suffering, counting every individual's interests equitably. To do this, we need to determine as accurately as possible the effects the actions considered have on happiness and suffering of all the individuals affected, and weigh them accordingly.

Some assumptions made for feasibility

First, we will assume the positive emotions animals experience when being photographed or filmed is generally negligible. Even if this assumption were wrong and animals experience significant joy through these manipulations, these manipulations are not inextricably linked to the practice of taking and posting footage of that animal on social media. This means that, to maximise happiness, utilitarianism may require that these joy-bringing actions are performed separately from social media purposes altogether. It can therefore never be decisive in the utilitarian calculation. For these reasons, the potential happiness the individual animal experiences as a result of their footage being taken is disregarded in the following utilitarian cost-benefit analysis.

At one point in time, the happiness of animals has ultimately been increased through anthropomorphisms by correctly ascribing to them a mind of their own, and thus being worthy of moral consideration. However, we have long since gone past this point, and on social media, anthropomorphisms are often erroneous. Therefore, the practice of anthropomorphising animals on social media will be assumed to, if anything, decrease welfare of animals by erroneously shifting perceptions of them.

The experience people have of seeing footage of animals on social media will be assumed to be a purely positive experience. This because the relation between how social media use may make people unhappy and how posting footage of animals on social media keeps people on those platforms is still highly speculative.

The utilitarian calculation

The morality of the action (M_a) we are considering is taking footage of an animal and subsequently placing that footage on social media. Broadly speaking, there are two main considerations, one being suffering that may be caused (S), and the other being happiness that may result (H).

The suffering component, which concerns animal welfare, can be split into two parts: The welfare of animals may be affected directly and at the individual level through the means of acquiring the footage (S_i), or indirectly at a societal level through long term consequences by erroneously shifting the perception of animals through anthropomorphisms (S_s).

The happiness component, which given our assumptions only concerns the happiness of people, can be split the same way: Happiness brought about both at the individual level by means of self-expression and performing a craft well (H_i), as well as at the societal level through the joy people experience by viewing footage of animals on social media (H_s).

To weigh these considerations against each other the relevant factors can be represented with the following formula:

$$Ma = (Hi + Hs) - (Si + Ss)$$

in which the value of Ma ought to be as high as possible (“maximised”).

There is still an important factor missing from the equation. That is, the amount of people that any given social media post reaches. This can be based on the number of followers (n) of the social media account on which the footage is posted. This variable is not relevant to Hi and Si, since these factors concern themselves with the single individual who takes and posts the footage, and the single animal whose footage is taken.

The adjusted formula is as follows:

$$Ma = (Hi + n*Hs) - (Si + n*Ss)$$

This makes it evident that the happiness of the individual photographer and the suffering of the individual animal play relatively a far *smaller* role in cases in which the photographer has *many* followers on their social media account, and a far *greater* role in cases where the photographer has *few* followers on their social media account. In the case of Jiffpom⁶ (introduction), the relevance of Hi and Si would be negligible compared to that of Hs and Ss. The difference in aggregated happiness that all followers get (n*Hs) from seeing footage of, for example, a dog wearing funny clothes, compared to the same dog not wearing any clothes, is most probably greater than the difference in frustration the dog would experience by either wearing those clothes or not wearing them (Si). This means that, as general advice, people who have a small amount of followers should sooner refrain from severely manipulating an animal than those who have a large social media following, on the utilitarian’s account.

However, there is yet another factor that determines the impact of n on the value of Ma. The impact of n on this utilitarian equation is relative to the *difference* in value between Hs and Ss, and whether this total value would be a net positive or negative. To illustrate this point more clearly, the utilitarian equation has been rewritten into this final formulation:

$$Ma = Hi - Si + n(Hs - Ss)$$

The values of Hs and Ss are very difficult to assess, given that much of the empirical evidence that is needed to do so is unavailable. It is clear that many animals suffer due to erroneous anthropomorphisms and promotion of “cute culture” on social media. As we have seen in the above, animals are punished for having presumed “guilty looks” on their faces, and their hereditary afflictions are idealized – and that’s just dogs. All the ways in which other species of animal come to suffer unduly and unnecessarily due to erroneous anthropomorphisms are difficult to map out.

On the other hand, it is also clear that viewing pictures of animals on social media brings much joy. Millions of people follow the Instagram account on a single dog.⁶ The popularity of unhealthy dog breeds is no doubt caused by the happiness it brings people to look at and care for these breeds. Perhaps people would not experience such joy if they were well-informed about the extent to which these breeds suffer, and the part they play in perpetuating this suffering.

If care were taken so that Ss were minimized by not making or promoting any erroneous anthropomorphism on social media, surely the practice of using animals for social media purposes would increase overall welfare. And if care is taken to not decrease the welfare of the

individual animal in ways that are not outweighed by the additional happiness people would get from harming them, the overall aggregated welfare would indeed be maximised!

However, preventing people from continuing to erroneously anthropomorphise animals on social media would not only require those people to be informed of the negative welfare consequences of this behaviour, but also for them to subsequently *change their behaviour*. The matter of whether a utilitarian ought to inform people is therefore *contingent* on the likelihood that these people would actually change their behaviour in response to being informed of this unpleasantness. On the utilitarian's account, it might be better to let people live in ignorance, and not take away the happiness they experience by caring for, for example, brachycephalic dogs. By not informing others, the owner's joy isn't spoiled by knowledge of these breathing problems and the ways in which they themselves are complicit in perpetuating the existence of such breeds. After all, if they are not going to change their behaviour anyway, they are made to feel bad about their choices unnecessarily! By informing others, one may *decrease* H_i and H_s , just for an increased *possibility* that this decreases S_i and S_s *in a more significant way*.

There is a relevantly similar reasoning explained by Regan in his book *The Case for Animal Rights* when discussing the utilitarian position on the practice of (not) eating meat and supporting intensive livestock farming. Regan argues that, since the utilitarian obligation to abstain from eating meat is contingent upon the likelihood that doing so will have a significant (positive) impact on the number of animals kept for intensive livestock farming, all that utilitarian meat-eaters would have to do to be morally justified in continuing to eat meat, is to eat *more* meat.⁷ Doing so would decrease the likelihood that the efforts of vegetarians actually significantly affect the number of animals raised intensively. And if the current situation is unlikely to be changed anyway, the utilitarian has the moral obligation to "enjoy themselves to the fullest." After all, they ought to *maximise* happiness. Though not quite as pro-active, being *ignorant* of the suffering people cause may certainly achieve a similar result. After all, if the suffering is unlikely to be alleviated by gaining knowledge of it, and the knowledge of it causes psychological suffering, this does not maximise happiness.

We will further review this utilitarian stance when reviewing the role the veterinarian might play in this.

The animal rights view on the use of animals for social media purposes

The basis for the rights view, its core moral principle, is the respect principle. This principle states that "we are to treat those individuals who have inherent value in ways that respect their inherent value." Individuals who have inherent value are, for example, those of whom can be said they are the "subjects-of-a-life." Subjects-of-a-life are those individuals who have, among other facets, beliefs and desires, preference- and welfare-interests, and an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain. In particular relevance to this thesis, cats and dogs are both examples of entities who are subjects-of-a-life. Though many other animals satisfy this criterium as well, it is beyond the scope of the present work to draw further lines here as to which other animals would or wouldn't be considered subjects-of-a-life. Furthermore, it is important to note that being a subject-of-a-life is not a *necessary* criterium that needs to be met to have inherent value. It simply is a *sufficient* one. It is equally important to note that both moral agents and moral patients possess inherent value, and that inherent value is a concept that does not come in degrees: Every individual who has it, has it equally to everyone else.⁷ For simplicity, "subjects-of-a-life" will be referred to as "sentient beings" in the following.

Individuals are not treated with respect if they are treated as if their value were merely dependent on their utility to the interests of others, or as if they were mere receptacles of value, such as of pleasure and pain. The considerations discussed in the above utilitarian section that

deal with manipulations that can be performed during the acquisition of footage of animals which could detract from their welfare are just as relevant to the rights view, or maybe even more so. This is because, from the respect principle, the harm principle can be derived. The harm principle states that it is *prima facie* wrong to harm sentient beings, of which actively detracting from their welfare such as in the ways described above is a prime example. However, in stark contrast to utilitarianism, the rights view categorically denies that harming sentient beings can be justified by appeals to the best aggregate consequences.⁷ This would treat sentient beings as if their value were reducible to their experiences and the effect they have on the experiences of others, thus not treating them with respect for their inherent value.

This means that, if it is reasonable to assume that an animal were to experience any sort of mental or physical pain/discomfort as the direct result of an action being performed to that animal, while that action is not in that animal's direct interests, the action ought to not be performed. This includes, but is not limited to, putting or keeping an animal in a certain place where it does not want to be, and forcing an animal to do or wear anything it does not want to, while also not being in their interests. "Forcing an animal to do something it does not want to" brings us to a second principle that is derivable from the respect principle: the liberty principle. The liberty principle entails that none may have their liberty limited on grounds that assume that the individual has value merely relative to the interests of others. This means that every individual has the right to exercise their freedom to attempt to not be made worse-off, so long as they do not violate the respect principle.⁷

There are a number of considerations that the rights view requires us to take into account when making an ideal moral judgement about taking footage of animals and posting that footage on social media, which haven't yet been explored in the utilitarian section. These will now be discussed.

Profiting off of social media accounts dedicated to animals

A practice that requires our attention is profiting off of an animal's social media presence, for example by selling merchandise such as the Jiffpom calendar that can be bought for \$14.99 (introduction).⁶ A utilitarian might point out that an animal is not caused any (additional) suffering by making a profit in this way, meaning that the practice is not problematic.

Though it is indeed true that selling merchandise does not detract directly from the animal's welfare, there is a risk that comes with such an action. Monetary gain can be a powerful motivator for people to exploit animals. An owner may start to treat their animal as a means to their financial ends. This constitutes a slippery slope that may result in the owner starting to treat their animal as if it were a *mere* means to this end. This may cause an owner to actively ignore the interests of their animal when considering whether or not to manipulate the animal in a way which it does not desire to be manipulated in. So, although not necessarily immoral in and of itself, one should be particularly vigilant when profiting off of their animal, and perhaps it should not be recommended, nor encouraged.

One could still argue that, as long as the animal is benefitted in *some* way, the animal is never treated as a *mere* means. One example is this is an animal receiving a treat or some attention when being manipulated in a way it ultimately finds to be unpleasant. Another example is an animal being given treats or toys that are bought using money gained from selling merchandise of the footage taken as a result of this manipulation.

This argument is a fallacy. Just because an action is in *one* of the animal's interests, does not mean it is in the overall interest of the animal as a whole. For example, living inherently comes with problems that a subject of that life has to face. However, it does not follow that because

death automatically does away with these problems, that the death of a sentient being is always “in its interests.” To believe otherwise is to twist the meaning of what is in someone’s interests, and to misconstrue what it means to treat another with respect.

To illustrate this point further, consider the following two scenarios:

The first scenario is one in which a human’s limb is removed and sold without their consent. The harmed individual is subsequently rewarded with an item bought using the money this sale generated. The second scenario is that an animal is given an x-ray because it is suspected of having broken a bone. The animal is uncooperative, yet the veterinarian still physically manipulates it against its will in order to take the radiograph.

In both cases, an action is performed against the expressed desires of a sentient being. While also in both cases, the action leads to benefit the sentient being in at least one of their interests. Do these cases warrant the same moral judgement?

The answer is, obviously, that they do not. After all, the two cases are dissimilar in a relevant respect, and dissimilar cases ought not to be treated similarly. The difference between the cases does not rest on a difference between X outweighing Y in an overall pleasure over suffering calculation. Rather, the relevant difference is that in the first case, the human does not consent to what is being done to them, while in the second case, though the animal also does not give its consent, it is likely that the animal *would* have given its consent *if it would have been able to make an informed decision*. However, in the second scenario, since the animal cannot understand why taking a radiograph is in their interests, it cannot give informed consent. It is in these cases that we ought to act paternalistically towards animals, and make these decisions *for* them. This is also the case when euthanising animals, when indeed the death of the sentient being *is* in its interest. One of the conditions for such paternalistic action is that the motivation behind the action is appropriately other-regarding; that the action is taken primarily out of concern for the individual to whom the action is performed.⁷ Parents frequently act in this way toward their young children, for example when they take away a large bowl of candy. The parent does not do this to spite the child, nor because they themselves want to eat the remainder of the candy, but primarily out of concern for the health of the child; for *the child’s* wellbeing. This is a factor which the child is unable to appropriately assess themselves. It is unable to correctly foresee the implications their decisions have on their own overall welfare. In other words, a young child cannot make decisions as well-informed as adult humans can, and neither can nonhuman animals.

In short, the defence given to justify harming an animal to make a profit fails on two accounts: One is that the meaning of “what is in someone’s interest” is twisted. The other is that the presumed paternalistic act is not appropriately other-regarding, therefore is not a paternalistic act at all, and thus is not morally justified.

The right to privacy

The right to privacy has been much debated, and has proven to be notoriously hard to define. Moore (2003) has argued that the right to privacy can be conceptualized as a right to a certain amount of control over personal information and access to one’s body and capacities.³⁴ The question remains if the right to privacy has any place in the rights view. For the moral right to privacy to also be a right that is derivable from the respect principle, the right to privacy ought to demonstrably protect *universal* interests, not just those of humans.

An experiment by Calhoun (2006) showed that rats who were kept in close proximity to each other without opportunity to separate themselves suffered from significant welfare issues. This was evidenced by the disruption of social relations, increased aggression, increased incidence of disease, and increased neonatal death that ensued as a consequence.³⁵ Moore argues for a

right to privacy for humans because of the evident importance of privacy to the wellbeing of social sentient beings, using Calhoun's experiment as further evidence by making reference to its evolutionary roots.³⁴ Nevertheless, Moore denies the possibility of intelligibly applying the concept of privacy to sentient nonhuman animals, only granting them the concept of "separation" instead of "privacy." The reason Moore gives for making this distinction is that nonhuman animals possess no free will, in contrast to humans.³⁴

This claim is false. Deterministic objections aside, if free will is a concept that can be intelligibly applied to human animals, then so it can to sentient nonhuman animals. Regan's extensive ironclad defence for this can be read in *The Case for Animal Rights*. In his book, Regan explains in detail why, on account of the principle of parsimony, the ability to make choices in accordance with desires ought to be attributed to other sentient animals.⁷ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to repeat the specific arguments here.

We will therefore conclude that privacy is a concept that is equally applicable to both humans and other animals. However, if a right to privacy is to be viewed as a universal moral principle derivable from the respect principle, the question needs to be answered whether nonhuman animals have any specific interests that are protected by a right to privacy. Calhoun's experiment shows a clear correlation, but is not a sufficient argument by itself. Perhaps the less advanced cognitive abilities of nonhuman animals might make a difference in this regard?

Pepper (2020) argues it does not.³⁶ Pepper argues that animals have interests that a right to privacy protects, because they too have an interest in controlling how they present themselves to others.³⁶ Pepper gives many examples for how animals control the way they present themselves to others, such as through social behaviours, e.g. greetings, and through tactical deceptions, e.g. hiding their food from sight.³⁶ As Moore concurs, property can be seen as an extension of oneself,³⁴ much like how the animal someone owns is a facet of their identity which they might wish to share with others on social media. The food an animal has procured, such as the food a scrub jay might endeavour to hide to prevent it from being taken by others, though not legally, can certainly be regarded as their "property," as "theirs," from their perspective.

So, not only is the concept of privacy applicable to nonhuman animals, they also have an interest in being able to control information relating to them. This means that the right to privacy is indeed readily derivable from the respect principle. However, one might argue that animals do not lose any control they could have an interest in if footage of them is posted on social media. After all, animals do not have Instagram accounts. They do not have the capacity to look up footage of themselves or others. They may not even be capable of recognizing their own image. Surely, by posting footage of them on social media, the right to privacy animals may have is not violated?

This objection ignores the fact that animals not only have social relationships with other *nonhuman* animal, but also with *human* animals. Since animals have relationships with humans, it is also in the interest of animals to be able to control what information about them is being obtained by humans. This is not to say that the right to privacy can be reduced to a form of utilitarianism. Pepper argues that the wrong committed is not reducible to psychological suffering, like an individual may experience in the case of overt surveillance.³⁶ The fundamental interest that roots an animal's right to privacy is not its interest not to *suffer*, but its interest to have *control* over how they present themselves to others. This control is relevant to the wellbeing of every individual that maintains relationships of different kinds with others. The distinction from utilitarianism further comes into focus when we realise that nonhuman animals do not only have a right against unjustified *overt* surveillance, but also against unjustified *covert* surveillance. This is not because of any direct psychological suffering that is caused, since there

is none, but *because the animal may have chosen to act differently if it knew it were being observed*. They are unable to control the information about themselves that is being gained by those observing it, nor how this affects how the animal is perceived by the observer.³⁶ To illustrate this point, imagine footage of you were covertly taken while in the shower. You would never learn that this had taken place, you would never encounter the footage online. You would not be made aware of its existence in any way. Still, it is quite obvious that your right to privacy has been violated; that you were *harmed* in some way. A right to privacy protects humans from this in fundamentally the same way that it protects animals.

Of course, if an animal is covertly surveilled by a camera for its own protection, for example, when under observation in a veterinary clinic because of serious health concerns, the surveillance is in the animal's (overall) interest. In such a case, the animal is treated with the respect it is due; not as a mere means to an end. In contrast, ignoring the interests of a sentient being merely for the benefit of others, for example, *merely* for the viewing pleasure of humans on social media, *does* treat the sentient being as a mere means to an end, which is in clear violation of the respect principle.

Treating animals as children on camera

There is a final objection to the use of animals for social media purposes that should be considered. It is the objection that by dressing animals in “silly” clothing, having them perform “funny” tricks, or by speaking for them in child-like high-pitched voices, taking footage of this, and distributing said footage, those animals are being *belittled*, *humiliated*, and are therefore not treated with the respect they are due.

This is a well-intentioned concern showing empathy, as well as some much needed moral vigilance people would do well to emulate. However, the objection is largely the consequence of erroneous anthropomorphism, and therefore misses the mark. It is certainly true that if an adult human were treated this way, or even an older child, it would be objectionable for the reasons laid out. However, treating animals as young children would not plausibly evoke psychological suffering to the animal, like it would in the case of a human adult being treated like a child. After all, the animal does not attribute the same meaning to these actions as we humans would if they were done to us. An animal does probably not realize that “baby talk” can be seen as a sign of not being taken seriously, or for being seen as less capable, or less independent, nor is it probable to assume that they would care even if they did understand. After all, animals, pets especially, *do* often have a child-like relationship with their owners, and they *are* dependent on them. Therefore, treating animals as such does not belittle them; it is a correct reflection of the relationship they have with their owner. To take moral issue with this is to take moral issue with the current way in which animals are kept for companionship, which we have in the introduction already assumed to not be problematic in and of itself. Though this is a position that can certainly be challenged, it is not our place to do so here. Therefore, for all intents and purposes, the fact that animals are treated in a child-like manner, be it on camera or not, is not *prima facie* wrong, on account of the rights view. The exception would be when a moral agent treats an animal as a human child with the *intent* of humiliating that animal. Whether this attempt would be successful or not is irrelevant to the moral objectionability of it on account of the rights view. The intent behind the action would betray that the moral agent performs the action without respect for the inherent value of the animal.

What may be morally objectionable as well is the practice of placing footage of such treatment on the internet if it is reasonable to assume that doing so would cause an erroneous shift in how people perceive animals. However, this is a different objection, which has already been covered extensively in the utilitarian section.

The rights endpoint

There are still many different uncertainties at play when making a moral judgement on the practice of using animals for social media purposes on account of the rights view. For example, as is the case for the utilitarian, assessing what manipulations an animal may or may not experience as unpleasant remains difficult. The same goes for assessing what an animal may or may not consent to if it were well-informed (when to act paternalistically). Given the different motivations people may have when making these judgements, and the slippery slope this might entail for the continued respectful treatment of animals, the general advice on account of the rights view is simply not to use animals for social media purposes; to err on the side of caution. However, if one insists on taking and sharing footage of animals, but still wants to do so within the proper moral limitations on account of the rights view, this should be done in the following manner:

First of all, an animal ought not to be taken footage of if it is unaware it is being observed, on account of their right to privacy. In other words, the photographer would need to make their presence known. Then, if the animal does not attempt to hide in any way, footage may be taken. Should the photographer want to manipulate the animal in some way, by placing it somewhere else, having it stand still, having it perform a trick, or having it wear clothing, they ought to consider the following: If it is reasonable to assume that the animal would experience any discomfort during the considered manipulation (the harm principle), or if the animal is not in a position in which it could refuse to cooperate (the liberty principle), the manipulation should not be performed. After footage has been taken, it should not be shared with anyone who was not present when the footage was taken. This because the animal may not want to enter into a relationship with other humans who were not present, or may want to enter into a different kind of relationship with other humans than with the ones who were present when the footage was taken. Sharing the footage with third parties robs the animal of having control of these interests, which once again violates their right to privacy.

Although traditionally a child might receive a pet as a Christmas gift along with other toys, people should realize that animals are not our playthings. Animals may often not be aware of what is actually being done to them, of what they are missing, and of what is in their interests. However, exploitation of this ignorance does not lessen any wrongs committed. Rather, this compounds them.⁷ Forcing animals to present themselves in ways in which they do not wish to present themselves, by having them perform or dress in human clothing in front of a camera which presence they may not be aware of, to be unknowingly observed by unknown individuals over the internet for their amusement, violates their right to privacy, their right to liberty, their right not to be harmed, and ultimately and most fundamentally, their right to be treated with respect for their inherent value.

The rights view does not only recognise negative duties, however. A policy of non-interference is not enough to act justly. If one has a right, then others have a duty of assistance in protecting the one who has that right against those who would violate it.⁷ It is, therefore, everyone's duty to assist animals whose right to respectful treatment is violated, such as in the ways described above. It is the moral duty of every advocate for animal rights to participate in the abolishment of those practices that routinely violate the rights of animals. More on this will be said in a later section when discussing the role a veterinarian might play in moderating the practice of using animals for social media purposes.

Holding multiple mutually-exclusive moral views simultaneously

Very few people are committed to a single ethical theory. This already became readily apparent from the limited number of people who participated in the focus groups discussing the practice

of the use of animals for social media purposes. Though people often lacked the insight (or interest) to take a broader scope and to actually consider *maximising* happiness, their arguments often showed sentiments and values coherent with utilitarian ones. For example, suggestions were made to improve utility by stating social media posts would be better if they were also educational, instead of merely entertaining. It was also suggested that as long as an animal does not suffer as a consequence of actions taken, there is no moral issue.

However, people did not only give utilitarian oriented arguments, but also gave arguments corresponding more closely to the sentiments and values behind other ethical theories. Rights oriented counterarguments to utilitarian sentiments were made, such as the one discussed previously about economical profits incentivising people to exploit animals.

This pluriformity was not limited to merely utilitarian oriented and rights oriented arguments either. Both utilitarianism and the rights view agree that moral agents and moral patients all have equal moral value and that their interests ought to be counted equitably. However, some people advanced arguments that bespoke of a perspective in which this was not the case. One participant believed animals were deserving of less assistance compared to humans, stating that when their pet breaks a bone they would have a veterinarian euthanise it instead of providing it with further medical care. Another participant did believe that if their cat or dog were deathly ill, a veterinarian should euthanise it, though if their guinea pig were in the same situation, they would rather have their neighbour end the animal's life. These perspectives do not correspond to either a utilitarian orientation or rights orientation.

Not only did people in the focus groups have different ethical perspectives between them, but arguments relating to different moral theories were also given by the same person. It is possible that the participants used arguments outside of their own personal ethical viewpoints solely as part of a discussion strategy to get more differing arguments into the discussions. However, assuming the participants did indeed have hybrid approaches consisting of multiple ethical frameworks, this leads to some problems. Many ethical theories are incompatible with each other. This is certainly the case for utilitarianism and the rights view. As stated before, the rights view is very much anti-utilitarian. Utilitarianism places all moral weight with the experiences of pleasure and pain, while the rights view's postulate of inherent value categorically denies that sentient beings ought to be seen as mere receptacles of experiences such as pleasure or pain. Indeed, the rights view clearly states that inherent value is a type of value that is distinct from, incommensurate with, and not reducible to experiences of pleasure and pain. Any attempt to combine these theories, or to draw lines between them, such as in "threshold deontology/utilitarianism," to determine when either theory prevails when faced with a moral challenge, is therefore not just arbitrary, but contradictory. The principle of utility and the principle of respect cannot be true at the same time; they are mutually exclusive. Yet people hold both utilitarian oriented and rights oriented values at the same time. In *The Case for Animal Rights*, Regan states: "*To fall short of the ideal moral judgment by committing oneself to a contradiction is to fall as short as one possibly can.*"⁷

To disregard the need for, or even the importance of consistency, is to deny that any rationality or logic behind ethical thinking is required at all. Everyone can simply hold whatever ethical beliefs they want, for whatever reason. Moral judgements originating out of bias, out of feelings, or out of personal preference, would all be as valid as those moral judgements originating from sound ethical theory. Morality would be reduced to a matter of opinion. Therefore, if you saw me brutally torturing a child on the street, all you would be justified in doing is to perhaps express your own subjective distaste for my actions, but nothing more. After all, to each their own; everyone's opinion ought to be respected. Unless, of course, you are of the opinion that other people's opinions should *not* be respected, and that *your* opinions are more valid than those of others, simply on the basis that you are you, and others are not. At this

point, we have entered a state of total moral anarchy. This is not even “rational egoism,” but simply “egoism.”

Though claiming opinions are valid moral judgements is problematic in any event, this is especially true on social media. Social media makes it easy to safely share controversial opinions with a great amount of people. Taking these opinions as valid moral judgements may lead to some extremely undesirable conclusions on moral questions, which are exacerbated through the creation of online echo chambers. It also means that the answer to the central question this thesis is attempting to answer would be self-evident: Virtually everyone’s opinion on the current social media presence of animals is positive. Rarely are any negative opinions on the practice voiced. This is illustrated by the lack of ethical debate on the topic in literature. After all, ‘why raise ethical concerns where there aren’t any?’ This would mean that the use of animals for social media purposes is not in need of any moral limitations at all. But can we really still readily claim this after the above-mentioned objections to parts of this practice from the utilitarian and rights perspectives?

In defence of ideal theory

I take the position that one ought to always fully comply with one and the same specific ethical theory which makes clear what an ideal just world would look like, thereby taking a hard stance against any moral relativist opinion-based ethical framework which permeate many social media platforms. Ideal theory is also radically at odds with how veterinarians are taught to deal with ethical problems (this is further explained in the section “Implications for veterinary education”). Because one objective of this thesis is to give ethical guidelines to veterinarians in particular, an extensive defence of ideal theory will be required to change the minds of veterinarians who have since their veterinary ethics education always believed in nonideal forms of ethics. In the following, objections against ideal theory will be addressed, and some merits of it explained.

Ideal demands

First of all, some may say that ideal ethical theories are “too demanding” and ignore real world complexities and human fallibility.^{37,38}

Let me briefly address the first part of this objection by stating that I sincerely hope that nobody reading this has been made to believe that ‘doing what is right’ should be easy.

The second part of the objection fails to recognize why ideal theory exists in the first place. One indeed ought to comply fully with a single ethical theory. However, it’s primary function is not to convert others into morally perfect beings. Rather, ideal theory shows us a clear ideal to *strive* for. Without clarity of what it is one should strive for, the direction in which one would have to change to improve would be unknown. Focussing on the actual attainability of the ideal misses the point.

Yet, some still maintain that in some cases, circumstances are such that full compliance to ethical theory creates a world that is overall *less* just, which would be unacceptable. The objection would have us believe that sometimes “moral trade-offs” are necessary to create a more just world. This objection fails, because true ideal theory, understood as full compliance to the best ethical theory, *can* only lead to ideal results, as defined by that theory. If partial compliance to an ethical theory seems like a good idea, this simply suggests that the wrong ethical theory is being followed. It is therefore not an objection to ideal theory in principle at all.

Paradoxically, others may not believe that adhering to ideal theory is too demanding, but rather that it is in a sense *not demanding enough*. They might feel like “blindly” following ideal theory is “morally lazy,” no longer innovative, leading to some sort of moral stagnation.

Ideas always ought to be challenged. If a better theory than either utilitarianism or the rights view emerges, of course that new theory ought to be followed and the others discarded. I have made no attempt to defend that either utilitarianism or the rights view is the perfect moral theory. I merely claim that these theories are *the best ones available at this time*. They are some of the *best* approximations of justice people have been able to think of so far, not necessarily the *ultimate* ones. Improvement, innovation, and discussion are still possible, probably even required, for both theories. Utilitarianism knows many subgenres, such as act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism, of which a discussion can be held which of the two is superior to the other. Regan recognizes that there are still details of his rights view that have yet to be ironed out, such as the question of how justice ought to respond to criminal behaviour, what positive duties of assistance we have specifically, and the question whether there are other sufficient conditions to justify attributing inherent value to someone or something besides the subject-of-a-life criterion.

Furthermore, making ethical decisions based on ideal theory requires constant vigilance. With every decision, one needs to determine what action *would* bring about the best consequences, or whether an action *does* treat another with respect for their inherent value. These are complex questions which have to be answered again and again *every time* an ethical decision needs to be made. I cannot imagine anyone who is disinclined to critical thinking keeping this up for very long.

Accountability

Ideal theory also provides something that nonideal theories of justice never quite can to the same extent: accountability.³⁸ As described above, people who do not follow ideal theory have oftentimes committed themselves to contradictions, essentially reducing justice to a matter of opinion. However, with an ideal theory of justice, one can give reasons for their ethical beliefs which can be appraised by appeal to the most fundamental basis of rational thought: consistency. By pointing out that it is inconsistent of me to believe that people ought not to be treated as mere means, yet I still torture children for my own amusement, it is clear to me that a least *one* of my moral beliefs requires serious revision. I can be held accountable in a way that wouldn't be possible by simply pointing out that my moral beliefs are different from yours.

Justice above all

Then again, others may say that not the value of rationality or consistency, but the value of *justice* is overrated.³⁷ All reasons do not need to be consistent with a principle of *justice* to be rational, so long as they *are* consistent with the higher value concept which justice is secondary to. This higher value concept might be democracy, peace, security, friendship, love, religion, tolerance, or living a meaningful life. Justice, the objection claims, may be a practical method of serving such a higher concept, but in times that it does not, reasons should only be as rationally consistent with the concept of justice as they need to be to act in favour of that other higher value concept. One *can* indeed intelligibly state that moral trade-offs are sometimes required to make a better world, if a *better* world is not necessarily a more *just* one.

This is putting the cart before the horse. These other concepts do not *precede* a concept of justice. Rather, they can be said to logically *follow* it as a consequence of being committed to the best ethical theory. The best ethical theory would not morally condone the existence of an oppressive totalitarian regime. And with a just government comes peace and security. It is doubtful that one desires relationships with people who routinely treat others (or them) unjustly.

A higher power that is worth believing in would be a just one. Tolerance is not always a virtue; we ought to not be tolerant to injustices, like someone torturing a child on the street. Living a meaningful life is dependent on whether one also lives a just life, but whether one lives a just life is not dependent on whether one lives a meaningful life.

Because these other concepts are either derivable from or dependent on justice, and not the other way around, it is the concept of justice that has the highest value. Therefore, it is justice that every reason should always be rationally consistent with.

Moral pragmatism and animal ethics

There may be one notable exception to the claim that most, if not all nonideal ethical frameworks are at their core inconsistent, and therefore are unable to provide accountability. This nonideal yet consistent ethical framework is moral pragmatism. Moral pragmatism is an ethical framework which equates what is good to what is practical for humans.³⁹ This means it has an underlying rule to which all moral principles are rationally consistent, even if the individual principles held would be inconsistent with one another. For a moral pragmatist, justice is little more than a useful social construct with which societal harmony and progress can be facilitated, and individual goals can be accomplished.

Moral pragmatism is not a satisfactory option for those who would enter the complex field of animal ethics.⁷ First of all, the fact that moral pragmatism equates the good with what is practical *for humans* specifically betrays the speciesist nature of this moral framework, making it unsuited to be used in animal ethics. Second of all, moral pragmatism is inherently inclined to conform to broadly held societal norms for the sake of practicality, meaning that moral pragmatists cannot pave the way as revolutionaries or pioneers when it comes to animal ethics. The moral pragmatist would not think it necessary to place many moral limits on the use of animals for social media purposes. After all, most societal members do not see the need for this. However, this is at odds with compelling arguments originating from utilitarianism and the rights view. Moral pragmatists can only rather passively move along with changing general societal perspectives, which are changed others; by pioneers who *do* dare to propose radical change, and who chart the underexplored areas within this branch of ethics which none have dared to explore before. The objection of “moral stagnation and laziness” is therefore better directed at moral pragmatism than at ideal theory. Animal ethics requires pioneers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, whose at the time controversial literary works spearheaded a major shift in the broadly held societal norms in only the past few decades.^{7,8} This demonstrates how fickle and malleable current societal perspectives on the ethical treatment of animals are. Conforming to what is practical now would be cutting that change short. Those involved in the debate concerning the ethical stewardship of animals, in particular veterinarians, should have the courage and moral vision to lead the way in this regard.⁷ This will of course not be easy, nor will it help in maintaining smooth relations and societal harmony. However, if this were the priority for Singer and Regan, it is obvious that animals would be in a much worse position in today’s society than they are now.

How to choose the best ethical theory

For reasons outlined in the introduction and the previous sections, I propose that utilitarianism and the animal rights view are the best ethical frameworks to provide guidance in solving moral problems related to using animals for social media purposes. However, choosing between these theories is a difficult task, because both are sound ethical theories. Both the utility principle and the respect principle are in line with the conditions formulated in the introduction which any ethical theory claiming to be the best one should meet, i.e. rational consistency, impartiality, universality, ability to give specific direction, and possessing a wide scope.⁷

In order to come to a choice, the appeal to our “considered beliefs” can play a role. These beliefs are much like our intuitions, though they differ in some important respects. Considered beliefs are not simply beliefs we happen to have (i.e. “prereflective intuitions”), but are those beliefs that we still have after having considered them in a calm, rational, impartial manner, while having done our best to adequately inform ourselves, as well as to have made an effort to have as much clarity on the relevant concept(s) as can reasonably be expected.⁷ If we have done this regarding an intuition, yet we still maintain this belief, it has evolved from being a mere intuition to being a considered belief.

The best ethical theory, all other things being equal, is the one that is capable of accommodating the greatest number of our considered beliefs, or the most important ones which we are unwilling to compromise on.

It warrants mentioning here that those beliefs that, after choosing an ethical theory to follow, still do not find any place in this “best moral principle,” ought to be discarded.

Both utilitarianism and the rights view are capable of grounding many widely held considered beliefs. For example, both theories are capable of giving rational arguments why it would be wrong for me to torture a child on the street for my amusement. Philosophers who have wanted to give arguments to discredit these moral theories have therefore had to carefully craft scenarios in which it can be shown that utilitarianism and the rights view do not correspond with an important widely held considered belief. People’s considered belief that killing is generally morally reprehensible is often used in these examples. For example, in the case of utilitarianism, an argument against it is made by explaining that the theory would endorse “secret killings” by the government to increase the overall aggregated welfare of the populace.⁷ In the case of deontological theories like the rights view, a well-known argument is that these theories do not allow one to lie if a killer were to show up at one’s doorstep and asks them about the whereabouts of their next target.

Frankly, these arguments remain wholly unconvincing, and have a desperate air to them. Rather than discrediting the moral theories they oppose, these arguments almost have the opposite effect. They show that it was apparently necessary to handcraft these very specific unrealistic scenarios to be able to poke the tiniest of holes in these ethical theories. To put it mildly: Chances are slim that anyone reading this will ever be in a situation in which they need to choose to permit a secret government hit, or in which a murderer who makes their intentions clear to them politely asks them for the location of their next victim.

Rather than to judge these ethical theories on their ability to accommodate our considered beliefs based on such warped cases, it would be much more convincing if they were judged based on a case that is of actual relevance and importance in the real world. This gives both theories a fair chance on account of that the case that is being considered is not specifically tailor-made to discredit either of them.

It just so happens that we have been extensively reviewing one such case: The practice of using animals for social media purposes. We have calmly, rationally, and impartially reviewed the relevant factors to both ethical theories, making us as informed as can reasonably be expected, and giving us adequate conceptual clarity. We have followed both ethical theories to their logical endpoints. Now the question remains which of these endpoints is most in line with our considered beliefs.

What utilitarianism and the rights view demand from veterinarians

Perhaps it would be enlightening to compare the utilitarian and rights perspectives while applying them to the veterinary profession. After all, one goal of this thesis is to give moral guidance to this profession in moral matters related to the use of animals on social media.

If any action ought to be taken, according to both utilitarianism and the rights view, it would be to at least inform others of the issues described in the hopes of changing their behaviours so that animals are harmed less. Not only can veterinarians explain to owners why their animal does have an interest in having their privacy respected, veterinarians can also play a role in educating the populace about recognizing and correctly interpreting the ways in which animals communicate. As explored earlier, correctly interpreting ways in which animals communicate plays a big role when trying to determine whether an animal is being harmed directly through a manipulation. Veterinarians are taught, for example, that intraspecies communication in the case of felines can take three major forms: body postures, vocal expression and visual/olfactory marking. They are educated in recognizing, for example in the case of body postures of cats, the communicative meaning behind different body postures, such as the meaning of a vertically-held tail with or without the presence of piloerection, and the presence of either flattened or forward-pointing ears.⁴⁰ This is knowledge that many animal owners lack, which veterinarians can provide them with.

The most important reason for why veterinarians are eminently suited to fulfil this role is not their knowledge of animal behaviour, however, but their singular position in society. Most owners of animals routinely come to speak to veterinarians about their animals, for example during yearly vaccination consultations. This gives veterinarians a great number of opportunities to advise owners on their treatment of their pets which other animal experts or ethicists do not nearly have to the same degree.

The question remains whether veterinarians *ought* to inform the public about the issues we have thus far discussed. The practice of taking footage of animals and posting it on social media is one that is so ubiquitous, so adored by people, that changing people's ways by informing them on the complicated reasonings that advocate to place limitations on the practice may be difficult. We ended the utilitarian section on the argument that, for a utilitarian, it is important to consider the likelihood of success of an action. Utilitarians should not burden people with knowledge that causes them discomfort if people aren't going to act on this knowledge to such a degree that more happiness is generated than the suffering that is caused by this awareness. However, it is unclear what the actual likelihood of significant change would be by informing people about these issues. Here we are limited by one of the major drawbacks of utilitarianism: It's reliance on empirical data that often isn't available. Utilitarian veterinarians would have to use their own best judgement to choose whether to inform owners. Perhaps these veterinarians ought to be reminded of the oath they swore that makes them duty-bound to use their knowledge and expertise to improve animal welfare and to adequately inform owners.⁴¹ However, utilitarians of course do not see the need to uphold oaths per se (save for perhaps some rule utilitarians).

Let us now consider: How should an advocate for animal rights respond? Though the likelihood of success is a very relevant consideration in the eyes of the utilitarian, for the rights advocate this has little bearing on what is required of them as a matter of strict justice, if the choice is between (possibly) harming a sentient being or simply not doing so.

The moral limits that have been described in the rights section are based on basic moral duties that apply to everyone equally; so called "unacquired duties."⁷ However, veterinarians have additional duties they have taken upon themselves because of the position they have chosen to fill in society, or, more directly, because of the veterinary oath they swore to do justice to the

intrinsic value of the animal and to put the interests of animals first.⁴¹ This gives veterinarians the additional acquired duty to assist animals, even if doing so is against the interests of others. The oath implies that, for veterinarians, the interests of animals and those of humans are not to be given equal consideration, but that as advocates for the interests of animals, these latter interests ought to be “put first.”

An objection to this rights perspective may be anticipated here, which reasoning goes as follows: If every sentient being has equal inherent value, and their interests are to be counted equitably, on account of the rights view, then the interests of some (in this case, animals) cannot be given greater consideration than the interests of others (in this case, owners of animals and society). To do so would be speciesist, which runs afoul of the respect principle. Since any acquired duty that would violate the respect principle is invalid, rights veterinarians are not required to uphold this oath.

This objection fails, because it fails to see the context and spirit in which this statement in the veterinary oath is made. What I assume this part of the oath is meant to communicate, is to have veterinarians recognise that owners of animals and society have already accepted acquired duties of their own regarding animals. Society has laws in place meant to protect animals, which are duties everyone voluntarily agrees to by choosing to live in that society. Furthermore, by choosing to own an animal, much like choosing to have a child, one accepts the acquired duty of care that comes with it. This means that owners of animals and society, up to a point, *have forfeited the right not to be made worse-off* than the animals whose protection and care they have made themselves responsible for. The part of the oath that requires veterinarians to swear to “put the interests of animals first” seems to be meant to recognise these acquired duties, and to have veterinarians hold owners and other members of society *to* these duties. This means that, when an action is considered that *prima facie* harms both an animal as well as their owner, even if the harm the owner would suffer would be a *prima facie* greater harm than the harm the animal would suffer, it is the action that causes harm to the owner that must be carried out, even if the owner would be made worse-off.

This is of course not to say that the acquired duty of the oath allows veterinarians to violate the basic unacquired duty to always treat every sentient being in ways that respect their inherent value. The respect principle supersedes any other principle, because every other valid moral principle is derivable from it.

The best ethical theory

Based on how veterinarians ought to act on account of both utilitarianism and the rights view when it comes to the use of animals on social media, one of these theories will be declared as being stronger than the other.

As we have seen, the rights view requires veterinarians to uphold their oath and put the interests of animals first. On the other hand, utilitarianism requires veterinarians to act in assistance of animals only if this maximises happiness. Utilitarian veterinarians therefore only follow the veterinary oath if it happens to align with their utilitarian values, thereby not *really* respecting the oath at all. If utilitarianism were to be declared superior, the question then arises what the purpose would be of the veterinary oath. Perhaps none, meaning it should be dropped. If not, the answer to this question must be that, for members of society, it is reassuring to think that veterinarians *would* adhere to the oath. A utilitarian veterinarian ought to withhold information concerning the welfare of animals from their owners, or even lie to owners, if they believe this maximises happiness. This would be the case if, for example, the veterinarian believes the owner is unwilling to or incapable of actually acting on complete and truthful information in a way which more significantly increases animal welfare than that the inconvenient or uncomfortable knowledge burdens the owner. But such deceptions can only be effective if owners of animals do not doubt that veterinarians tell them the truth, or always act in the best

interests of their animal. This is where the purpose of the veterinary oath would come into play: The veterinary oath would be a convincing lie that lets veterinarians effectively manipulate owners, so that owners can continue to (falsely) believe that they are acting in the best interests of their animals, when this would maximise happiness.

I believe the veterinary oath is not merely a means of keeping up appearances to put people's minds at ease, but is reflective of general considered beliefs held by people and society. It is the belief that people come to veterinarians primarily out of concern for the wellbeing of their animal, not for their own. It is the belief that the duty veterinarians have is primarily to animals. Therefore, everyone, but especially veterinarians, ought to be advocates for animal rights.

Accepting the rights view as superior ethical theory has important implications for veterinarians who work in some animal industries, most notably the farm animal industry and lab animal industry. However, to explore these implications with the attention they deserve is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The duty of the veterinary professional regarding ethical use of animals for social media purposes

For a more detailed explanation of what adopting the rights view means for the morality of using animals for social media purposes, I refer to the previous sections of this thesis. In short, adopting the rights view as ideal theory means that harming animals when footage of them is taken or posted can never be justified merely on the grounds that others would benefit.

Veterinarians act as a bridge between the interests of both animals and people, the latter of which have vastly different perspectives on how to live ethically. It is not feasible to have veterinarians convert every owner that enters their consultation room into an advocate for animal rights. However, it is the responsibility of veterinarians to at the very least inform owners of the ways in which they may be harming their animals when using them for social media purposes, of which they may not be aware. This is in essence no different from informing owners about the risks that obesity poses to the health of their animal. In both cases, the welfare of the animal is negatively impacted on account of the animal being harmed by the owner.⁴² In both cases, owners are often not aware they are harming their animal. It is the duty of assistance and the duty to honour the oath they have taken which demands that veterinarians ought to make owners aware of this. Again in both cases, these issues are most appropriately addressed during routine health check-ups and vaccination consultations. In addition to routinely weighing an animal during such a consultation, perhaps it would be appropriate to incorporate a short inquiry into the ways the owner uses their animal for social media purposes into these consultations. Owners can then be informed of ways in which animals may communicate their displeasure as a consequence of manipulations, as well as of the factors which animal welfare is dependent on (e.g. ability to adapt to the environment), and therefore which manipulations ought to be performed judiciously. The joy an owner experiences through taking and posting footage of their animal on social media can be no justification for this, nor is it morally relevant how large their social media following is. After all, some owners clearly immensely enjoy spoiling their animals by giving them treats, yet this should be no reason to not address that their animal is suffering from obesity.

Implications for veterinary education

It is obvious that, from a medical perspective, veterinarian should be taught about the ways in which using animals for social media purposes could harm animals, as is extensively explained

in the above. However, what may be an even more pressing issue is the fact that the veterinary ethics curriculum is radically at odds with the ethical stance this thesis takes.

The veterinary school at the University of Utrecht teaches their students that ethical reflection is “a dynamic process that heads towards a reflective equilibrium, that includes considered moral intuitions, relevant moral facts and broadly shared principles.” However, these intuitions are not always consistent with all broadly shared principles, and all broadly shared principles are certainly not always consistent with one another. Additionally, it is unclear what principles exactly satisfy the criterium of being “broadly shared.” Even if it were obvious which principles to follow, there would still be no clear hierarchy between these principles. How, then, is one supposed to reach “reflective equilibrium,” if not by assigning hierarchical structures between these principles based on one’s own intuitions, which are in turn based on one’s own upbringing, tradition, and prejudice? “Relevant moral facts” are assessed by “broadly shared principles,” while at least the hierarchical structure between these “broadly shared principles” is determined by “considered moral intuitions.” To place “considered moral intuitions” at the top of a moral decision making hierarchy is philosophically controversial.⁷ This is why I have only resorted to appeals to considered beliefs to differentiate between utilitarianism and the rights view after having exhausted less subjective, less controversial criteria, i.e. impartiality, universality, rational consistency, wideness of scope, and action-guiding power.⁷

Paul Thagard describes reflective equilibrium as “a smokescreen for a relatively sophisticated form of logical and methodological relativism.”⁴³ Reflective equilibrium therefore does not escape the charges of inconsistency, lack of a clear aim, and lack of a basis for accountability, which all moral relativist ethical frameworks are subject to.

To avoid this, veterinary students who give seriously weight to these teachings anyway, but do as well as to their moral obligation to hold themselves to a somewhat higher ethical standard than moral relativism, would be forced into a moral pragmatist framework. As explained in the above, this is undesirable, especially for veterinarians and others taking part in discussions about the ever-evolving perspectives concerning animal ethics. This is beside the point, however, since it is doubtful many veterinarians consider themselves “moral pragmatists.” After all, veterinary students are never taught about moral pragmatism in the first place.

What veterinary students *are* taught about are ethical theories such as utilitarianism and the animal rights view, albeit extremely superficially. Imposed on them is the sentiment that having some knowledge of these ethical theories is merely a useful reference when faced with a moral problem, as part of their proverbial “toolbox” of “broadly shared principles,” which their (considered) intuitions give them free reign over. This of course leads veterinary students to cherry pick among these ethical theories at their convenience. They see nothing wrong with following a different ethical orientation for every new moral problem, whether the ethical frameworks they use interchangeably are actually mutually exclusive or not. The merits of following a single ethical theory are never taught to them either.

It should therefore come as no surprise that veterinary students are often quite content with the nebulous approach of reaching “reflective equilibrium.” After all, they already have plenty of “intuitions” (i.e. opinions) about “moral facts” (whatever those are precisely). All they are taught that good philosophical practice requires of them is to reflect on their intuitions (making them “considered” intuitions), before deciding based on those intuitions what “broadly shared” (i.e. non-controversial) moral principle they feel like choosing to solve any particular moral problem.

If this is all the veterinary ethics curriculum has to offer, one has to wonder what the merit is in teaching veterinary students about ethics at all. Perhaps it is for future veterinarians to be able to reassure themselves of that they are indeed conducting themselves ethically. However, as I have explained in previous sections, I do not believe that reassurance should be the primary objective of ethics, nor of the veterinary oath.

What has been discussed in this thesis are admittedly relatively advanced ethical concepts for non-philosophy students. However, perhaps it is time to accept that medical professionals should not be content with merely the absolute basic level of education on ethics. Even if veterinary students choose to prefer moral relativist ethics like reflective equilibrium over moral objectivist ethics such as full compliance to the rights view, they should at least be informed well enough about these concepts to be able to make an informed decision, instead of reflective equilibrium simply being presented as the norm. Not being informed about these concepts and their (de)merits would be a discredit to any moral agent, but to veterinarians, given their great responsibilities and the frequency with which they face complicated moral challenges, it is an inexcusable failing that may forever tarnish the reputation of this esteemed profession.

Conclusion

The ethics of using animals for social media purposes is a novel branch of animal ethics that is as of yet underexplored. For reasons of rational consistency, which provides accountability, as well as for the sake of much needed moral ambition, objectivist ideal theory should be used to rise to moral challenges, especially when it comes to animal ethics. Utilitarianism and the rights view are both examples not only of objectivist ideal theory, but of ethical theories that are rationally consistent, impartial, universal, possessing adequate scope and action-guiding power. Between the two, the rights view most closely conforms to generally held considered beliefs about justice. Until the day that a better ethical theory is created, the ethical framework of the rights view should be used to assess every moral problem. This includes the question of whether the use of animals for social media purposes is in need of moral limitations. From the perspective of the rights view, the answer to this question is a resounding 'yes.' Routine ways in which footage of animals is taken may negatively impact the welfare of animals, most notably when animals are extensively manipulated and/or are deprived of the freedom to not participate in staged situations. Furthermore, like humans, animals have a moral right to privacy. This right is violated in virtually all cases in which footage of animals is publicly shared on social media platforms. In addition, the opportunity to monetise footage of animals on social media platforms gives owners an incentive to start to treat their pets as if they were mere means to their financial ends, and to thereby violate the right of animals not to be harmed and for their right to privacy to be respected. It is the moral obligation of every moral agent to not harm their animals and to respect their right to privacy on account of the respect principle. Though every moral agent also has a positive duty of assistance to protect animals from having these rights violated, this is doubly the case for veterinarians, who have sworn an oath which makes their duty of assistance to animals explicit to society. This gives veterinarians the moral obligation to inform owners of the ways in which they may be harming their animals. To this end, I suggest that veterinarians make routine inquiries to how owners use their animals for social media purposes during vaccination consultations. For veterinarians to become aware of these moral duties, the ethical curriculum in veterinary schools is in need of serious revision. Veterinary schools ought not to promote relativistic or pragmatistic moral frameworks to veterinary students, and should educate these students on the merits of ideal theory and consistency between held moral principles.

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