

Killing of animals

Instruments for moral analysis

Document of the Veterinary Bioethical Committee

C/o Ordine dei Medici Veterinari della provincia di Roma

C.G. Edizioni Medico Scientifiche, Torino c 2001

Summary of volume

By Laura Canavacci

The killing of animals by human beings is perhaps one of the most delicate subjects among those that are generally discussed in relation to the so-called question of animal rights.

In fact it brings into discussion strong emotions and important symbolic meanings on which behaviours and beliefs take root. Behaviours and beliefs that structure relationships between humans and animals in various cultures.

Although killing is only one of the moments of those that characterize life of non-human domesticated animals, and, from a temporal duration point of view, it is not one of the most important, nevertheless it clearly shows the meaning and the importance of human control over animals: moreover, there where domestication is nowadays characterised in advanced and intensive livestock breeding of animals used for human purposes, the number of animals killed has become enormous and it is not possible anymore to suppress the moral importance of such behaviours.

In fact the habit with which the majority of human society accepts the fact that animals are systematically killed for human purposes lives together with a common attitude nowadays with which moral importance is given to animal interests or furthermore to real animal rights with legislative efforts to protect as much as possible their welfare.

Hence the evident contradictions nowadays implicit in our behaviours towards animals lead inevitably to ask ourselves a series of questions: is it right to kill non-human animals ?

Are there any acceptable moral reasons to distinguish just animal killings from unjust animal killings? Which are these reasons? Is it not a radical hypocrisy to worry about the welfare of animals, especially of those so called pets, and then to recognize as legitimate their killing motivated only by human interests?

The Veterinary bioethical Committee has dedicated a volume to these problems which have often risen as a crux of moral confrontation in the subject matters dealt with previously.

However, it was clear from the beginning how it would be improbable to come to share the same conclusions on such matters, since these depend strictly from profound ethical convictions that characterize the considerations of each single person on the relationship between human beings and non-human animals: within the Committee itself in fact, like in human society in general, there is not only one attitude in reference to this moral problem and, although there is a growing awareness in that regard, the pluralism of the positions is still steadfast.

The logic priority of the discussion on moral legitimacy of animal killing (subject matter carefully dealt with, among other things, in a lot of philosophical literature on animal rights) has been substituted in the book with the practice of seeing the killing of non human animals as something that can however fall within those behaviours for which a specific human responsibility is recognized (although it is considered in different ways according to various ethical convictions).

Quite apart from the fundamental moral principles accepted by each one of us in relation to non human animals, the attempt, from a theoretical point of view, of the Committee is that to admit the fact that their killings are something for which we are all responsible: in fact we all share the thought of the presupposition of moral importance of non human animals and their welfare and then each one of us has to carry the burden, from a moral point of view, of their methodical killing.

On avoiding a discussion concentrated on principles, the book offers an attempt to search for an instrument that can develop a mechanism of growing responsibility on this topic which can be lead back, as last principle, to the mechanism of moral criticism: it wants to provide reasons for what is considered just in matter of animal killing, and for what on the other hand is considered wrong through reasoning suitable for confrontation with whoever has different opinions in regard, and therefore can be of help for an ethical examination.

The first chapter of the book offers suggestions for considerations on killing and death of animals according to anthropological, psycho-educational and ethological profiles: with the help of internal experts of the Committee and also of outsiders; the chapter tackles the fundamental question of symbolic meanings and of human representations in connection to animal killing: obviously the treatise is not complete considering the vastness of the subject matter and the enormous cultural differences to which it is subjected.

However, it is important to remember that the aim of the book is to give an idea of the extent that the analysis in this field can reach, even though, for the purpose of a merely moral research, such an approach can result misleading: there is infact the risk of making anthropomorphic the terms of the question and, especially, the meanings. Furthermore, the anthropological and symbolic representations that human cultures have built up through time in relation to death and killing of animals have no direct connection with the pertinent ethical questions. It certainly is right to also include these considerations of the problem, but however such an increase of knowledge cannot say much on the fact if it is just or unjust to kill animals, to sacrifice their lives for physical, cultural and psychological necessities.

In the second chapter, the killing of animals is dealt with as a “moral fact”, the relevance of which is important to try and tackle, from the point of view chosen by the Committee, not by referring immediately to questions of principles, but by setting up a discussion grate that may be useful for an inter-personal moral confrontation on each single case of animal killing and on the respective particularities.

Having at one’s disposal such an instrument of confrontation, would infact give sense to the dialogue on death of animals killed from very different points of view, such as the animalists’ or the breeders’, which are examples chosen as models of prototype figures in antithesis: this could offer a way to discuss not if a certain killing is hard and fast just or not just, but referring to common parameters, previously accepted as relevant, for a moral analysis of this kind of controversial cases. Suffering that killing gives to the animal before death is an immediate recognizable criterion. However, such a parameter, if considered in itself, results immediately insufficient: infact it must be related to other parameters pertinent to the case of animal killings.

The Committee has therefore tried to work in analogy with studies carried out in the field of research of welfare care and animal life in animal experimentation.

Having taken as example “Bateson’s cube” used by researchers in order to determine the ethical feasibility of an experiment on animals, the Committee has then formulated a sort of grate for ethical discussion on killing cases. Such an instrument does not absolutely want to be presented as a model of objective or almost objective opinion for the consideration of each single case of animal killing (as instead “Bateson’s cube “ is considered in some cases) since such a meaning would only come from naivety or bad faith. Having taken into serious consideration the “fact of the pluralism” also in regard to the animal question, the grate proposed in this volume is nothing else but the attempt to build up acceptable means for ethical confrontation, the more specific and pertinent possible with the examined ethical questions, useful for the purpose of identifying an ethical language comprehensible by everyone and necessary for an effective communication of different opinions in regard to animal killings: infact the hope is to make it in effect practible, where circumstances allow it, to outline possible points of agreement between opposite points of view and interests, but still open to dialogue.

In a very schematic way, the grate points out, within the parameters that are taken into consideration for the confrontation on animal killings, two first levels of research: the interests of animals and the interests of humans involved in the killings. At the first level the “suffering interests” (quantity and quality of the suffering inflicted directly to animals killed) and the “welfare interests” (interest of animals indirectly damaged by killing) are differentiated: a careful analysis of both interests is offered in regard to the methods and the capacities through which it is possible to identify the interests of animals and the studies that have been financed for this matter.

Human interests have also been brought into discussion in an articulated manner, by pointing out the difference between the “direct interests” and the “interests of mankind”(different groups of population and future generations). From this point of view, other perpendicular lines of research have been identified both for animal and human interests: a first factor that has to be taken into consideration in the analysis of the killings, is that of futility and possible alternatives; next the analysis of time factor is dealt with (moral convictions, interests and interventions considered lawful are all subject to a continuous evolution in time and in human cultures) followed by the analysis regarding killing methodologies which is considered as a further source of confrontation between irreconcilable positions.

The setting up of the grate for the ethical discussion on animal killings is dealt with in the centre part of the book. The book however contains a second part, which is only briefly mentioned here, in which the theoretical instrument elaborated is immediately illustrated in its use in a practical context: animal euthanasia.

One of the first questions dealt with in this regard concerns what has to be interpreted with such a meaning: often in fact, as far as veterinary practice is concerned, people tend to define as euthanasia every killing of animals finalized to different purposes carried out with the use of analgesic techniques or painless methodologies. For this reason it is best to remember instead that the meaning of euthanasia is only the painless killing of an animal affected by a serious pathology, incurable and that has come to a stage characterized by a lot of suffering for the animal itself.

Such a killing must then be motivated by the only reason which is that of putting in first place animal interests’, which means to alleviate suffering and pain of the sick animal.

Euthanasia in itself (similarly to the meaning that is given to this word when human beings are concerned) may be therefore attributed to a compassionate gesture towards an animal, in which any motivations concerning human interests must be absent. This gesture must be motivated by the only purpose to help what is thought to presumably be the primary unexpressed interest of a suffering animal with no therapeutic hopes and that is to stop suffering.

In order to make it possible to tackle with accuracy the moral analysis of animal euthanasia, it is necessary that all relevant parameters must be taken into consideration as indicated in the grate of discussion.

It is important to mention the analysis of animal interests (suffering interests) which is strictly connected to the appropriateness of the diagnosis and prognosis carried out by the veterinary doctor involved: therefore the Committee wishes to recommend in similar cases to consult another vet and get a second opinion, in order to limit the degree of partiality of the opinion that could be caused by possible human errors or by the technical-professional (diagnostic and therapeutic) means available in the medical-veterinary surgery consulted.

Still under the profile of a serene appraisal of the real interest involved, it is wise to prepare to assist the owner-carer who comes to this decision for his/her animal: maybe in fact that, behind a declared compassion in regard to the condition of the animal, is hidden an unwillingness or incapacity to carry the burden of the animal's condition which is emphasized in order to remove the problem.

For all the cases of euthanasia, as for all those cases that in this book have been defined "euthanasia killings" (all those killings carried out with painless practices that are in some way connected to pathological conditions of the animal that has to be killed or of the group to which it belongs) it is recommended the use of agreed decision methodologies (the so-called "informed consent" illustrated in the chapter dedicated to this topic), in order to create a condition of awareness and to build up a discussion on the terms of the decision and also to make all the people involved responsible for the decision.

As a completion of the analysis on the subject of euthanasia, the Committee has dedicated a special paragraph to the particularities that this practice assumes when it involves large animals bred for income.

The book also includes a chapter on the analysis of legal importance of killing and it is accompanied by enclosures that contain cards that illustrate the contents of some of the chapters, the letter of laws pertinent to the killing of animals, a bibliography and a jurisprudential review, and last, a few single signed contributions on specific subject-matters (Eulogy of pain and death: biological reasons, Gianluigi Giovagnoli; The meaning of animal death, Stefania Petrerà; Suffering and desperation for the loss of a dear one, Isabelle Marcq).