

The Ethics of Animal Shelters, by Valéry Giroux, Kristin Voigt and Angie Pepper

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COMPTE RENDU / REVIEW

The Ethics of Animal Shelters, by Valéry Giroux, Kristin Voigt and Angie Pepper

B.V.E. Hyde^{a,b}

Résumé

Dans cette analyse de *The Ethics of Animal Shelters*, j'explore l'approche pratique et philosophique du livre sur les dilemmes éthiques dans les refuges pour animaux, tels que l'euthanasie et le triage. Je souligne la pertinence du livre pour la bioéthique, malgré un engagement explicite limité dans ce domaine, et je critique sa justification de la mise à mort d'animaux en bonne santé dans des conditions non idéales. J'appelle à une plus grande implication de la bioéthique dans l'éthique des refuges et à la création de comités d'éthique pour soutenir la prise de décision.

Mots-clés

éthique animale, anthropocentrisme, refuges pour animaux, protection des animaux, bioéthique translationnelle

Abstract

In this review of *The Ethics of Animal Shelters*, I explore the book's practical and philosophical approach to ethical dilemmas in animal shelters, such as euthanasia and triage. I highlight the book's relevance to bioethics, despite the limited explicit engagement with the field, and critique its justification of killing healthy animals under nonideal conditions. I call for broader bioethical involvement in shelter ethics and the creation of ethical review boards to support decision-making.

Keywords

animal ethics, anthropocentrism, animal shelters, animal protection, translational bioethics

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Bioethics is anthropocentric. There are notable exceptions to this rule — for example, the Nottingham Centre for Applied Bioethics spans the School of Veterinary Medicine as well as the School of Biosciences. However, more often than not, bioethicists are only interested in humans. In fact, a recent book I reviewed on bioethics in the context of space exploration (1) went as far as to declare that *real* bioethics is essentially concerned with ethical problems caused by features of human biology, deriding those interested in nonhuman ethics (specifically astroethics) for misusing the term in its application to nonhuman subjects.

Animal ethics is usually considered a discrete field and you'd be hard pressed to find many animal ethicists identifying as bioethicists, or vice versa. However, in some cases, there are clear overlaps between the two. Animal experimentation is one of the most obvious, where discussion often centres around bioethical tenets such as beneficence, nonmaleficence and, increasingly, the need to respect animals' autonomy. In the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (Est. 1911), for example, there are numerous contributions on animal rights, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. In my view, another place where bioethics closely intersects with animal ethics — but one that's far less recognized than the laboratory — is the animal shelter.

Many of the ethical challenges in an animal shelter resemble those in a hospital. Both are spaces where care providers hold significant responsibility over vulnerable individuals and must make decisions in their best interest while respecting their dignity. Features of particular medical contexts can raise unique bioethical problems, such as when incapacitated or mentally disabled patients cannot give consent. Likewise, communication with animals is limited, raising some of the same bioethical challenges. Both medical and animal care also face fundamental challenges of balancing ethical ideals against a reality that's constrained by limitations on resources or available technologies.

Unfortunately, rarely in their book *The Ethics of Animal Shelters* (2) do Valéry Giroux, Kristin Voigt and Angie Pepper make an explicit comparison between the ethics of animal shelters and bioethics — unfortunate, because this is a good book with implications much wider than just animal shelters (which is one of the points I'm aiming to make by reviewing this book in a journal of bioethics). A lot of the topics the book deals with are commonly thought to be bioethical ones, such as euthanasia and triage protocols. Many of the themes overtly identified in the introduction are strikingly bioethical, including the difference between ideal moral theory and nonideal realities, disagreement amongst and compromise between practitioners, and an optimism that real conditions can be improved with strong ethical guidelines. Their methodology is also quite bioethical. They bemoan that philosophy, even so-called applied philosophy, "often proceeds from various idealizing assumptions" and fails to tackle the "messiness" of real-life situations, preferring instead a practitioner-driven methodology. Observe that a large amount of bioethics is done by doctors and biomedical scientists — only a minority is done by philosophers — and many who would call themselves bioethicists tend to be appointed to medical schools rather than philosophy departments. This is true in my own case, and I know it to be or have been the case for some of the most prominent bioethicists. Even the book's contributors have some connexion to bioethics. While the blurb describes it as the outcome of a collaboration between a team of *animal ethicists* and shelter workers, at least some of its authors could also be described as bioethicists.

The book is organized into two sections after an introduction. The first isn't divided into chapters and instead contains a long but concise list of guidelines and recommendations followed by a more extensive explanation and justification of them. The recommendations are specifically targeted at the Montreal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals but are applicable to all animal shelters. They address overarching problems, such as the use of language to discuss animals; its internal structure and decision-making; shelter operations; dealing with the public, animal industry, and governmental agencies; and work that focuses on feral animals. Less of an academic work, the authors describe this section as a "practical policy document," most of its suggestions being practical and logistical. For example, they recommend that organizations be separated into two sites: one for faster turnover activities like adoption; another for slower turnover activities such as long-term animal rehabilitation. Most of this advice has bioethical relevance. For instance, the suggestion to limit relationships with industry and to focus on distributors rather than producers could be immediately applied to a biomedical context.

The emphasis in section one is mostly on explanation because it's in the second section that more argumentative and philosophically rich chapters feature, beginning with a chapter on the value of death for animals. What's particularly useful about this chapter is the attention to the shelter context: Nicolas Delon (3) evaluates why euthanasia decisions in shelters might deviate from the standards applied to humans, arguing that euthanasia can sometimes be ethically justified under resource constraints or when prolonged shelter life would lead to significant suffering. He proposes that decisions about euthanasia be guided by ethical standards that respect animal interests, integrating an animal's potential future quality of life, wellbeing, and personality into these judgments. Rather than adopting an abstract theory of morality or wellbeing, the chapter outlines practical considerations for euthanasia decisions.

The next chapter also looks at the nonideal conditions that might lead to an animal being killed. Angie Pepper (4) argues that shelter staff are often confronted with the tragic choice of either killing animals or failing to care for them and leaving them to suffer. Consequently, shelters regularly kill animals who could have led good lives in other circumstances. She argues that shelter staff cannot be blamed for this because a lack of funding makes killing them the most humane of two bad options. Instead, the state is responsible for putting shelters into this bind in the first place.

Because they're operating with limited cash, staff, space, and resources, Angela K. Martin (5) entertains the idea that shelters might be justified in implementing triage systems. Her argument is that, because shelters cannot look after all the animals they'd like to, well designed triage protocols will make decisions about which animals to shelter less arbitrary, fairer and more transparent. She looks at how triage would work in practice, considering eight considerations from the context of human medical care:

1. maximizing benefit
2. justice
3. consideration of medical criteria
4. life-span considerations
5. fair decision-making
6. patient will
7. changes in the therapeutic goal
8. burden of triage and staff support

Such criteria are not always easy to understand or to apply, so she concludes by suggesting that an external ethics board can help animal shelters make difficult decisions.

The book is all about making decisions in animal shelters as ethically as possible in nonideal conditions. François Jaquet (6) examines three dimensions of shelter operations that, in an ideal world, would be impermissible: killing healthy shelter animals for lack of resources, building partnerships with animal agriculture, and feeding meat to shelter animals. He shifts the focus from moral ideals onto the material realities that animal shelters face, arguing that they ought to prioritize feasibility, permissibility and efficacy in their decision-making. From this, he argues, it follows that killing healthy animals for want of resources to look after them is morally acceptable in nonideal conditions.

The problem of killing healthy animals is not the only one discussed in the book's second section, but it's the one I've chosen to focus on in this review — not only because it's spoken about by the majority of the contributors, but because it's the most morally challenging. In my view, their solution is wrong. I dislike that they're justifying what is an abhorrent practice any way you look at it and find that their moral theorizing often tries to pin the wrongdoing on something other than the shelter staff killing the animals. A world in which killing is permissible in nonideal contexts is one in which life loses its sacrosanctity. It's one thing to say that it's a *necessary evil*, but another thing entirely to argue that it's *morally justifiable* due to nonideal conditions. Not all the contributors are unified on this front, but this is a distinction that's not very sharply defined in the book. I wholeheartedly sympathize with shelter staff whose hands are forced in this way, but I don't think they can go home at the end of the day and say that no wrong has been done. Killing is always wrong, no matter the circumstance, and blood is undeniably on their hands. In my view, the question is how to stop or at least reduce the bloodshed — a project aimed at wiping the blood from someone's hands only to paint someone else's strikes me as misguided.

While I do not fully agree with all their solutions, I think the book does makes a particularly useful contribution to a real context where people are faced with deep ethical quandaries on a regular basis. As I've also suggested, I think the book makes some interesting contributions to academic bioethics in ways that its editors haven't even realized. I'd like to see more bioethicists weighing in on animal shelters, and I'm supportive of establishing ethical review boards so that academics and interested members of the public can help shoulder some of the burden of the tough decisions confronting animal shelter staff.

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