

## *Topics in Wildlife Medicine: Ethical Considerations in Wildlife Medicine*

Wandering Through the Wilderness of Ethical Discourse  
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### **Introduction**

My veterinary school education did have a few lectures in veterinary ethics, though they mostly covered legal issues and jurisprudence. These in no way prepared me for the plethora of moral and ethical dilemmas I encounter as a veterinarian, especially regarding wildlife. I specialized in wild bird medicine, eventually moving to Guatemala to work with parrot conservation. While there I worked not only with parrots, but with other wild birds and animals that came into the clinic. What soon became clear was that I did not have the resources to adequately and humanely house and treat the wide variety of animals that came to me. I had to make choices that would provide more or less care to the patients, to the staff, to myself, and to the people who lived in the communities around me. As one professor of mine once said, "Life is full of tragic choices. There is no correct ethical stance over another, only the presence of one another to support us as we engage to make difficult decisions in our life."

As a student I didn't really want to hear this, and I imagine that veterinary students today or veterinary medical team members don't either. In my experience in teaching ethics most people just want the right answer, or some logical, rational approach that will allow ease in making the best decisions. This is not the reality I have discovered. After I returned from Guatemala to the U.S.A. I began to incorporate the process of ethical deliberation in my practice as a veterinarian. I had some help along the way, because slowly over the years, ethical approaches other than those to navigate laws and malpractice have been making headway in our profession. Though still not prominent in veterinary schools, one can now discover ethical presentations at conferences, in journals, and in books (see Recommended Reading).

The extent to which we gain proficiency in ethical discourse however is not adequate, for how we decide and handle ethical conflicts is a paramount challenge in wildlife medicine today. At the National Wildlife Rehabilitator Associations' 2010 Symposium last year I heard the elected leaders and many members there state how we "got along with one another" as the most pressing concern among those working in wildlife rehabilitation. Many of these relational issues arise due to differences in how we treat animals, and are fundamentally entwined in how we choose self interests over interests of others. This choosing process between interests of self and others is what we know as ethical deliberation. The more skilled we can become in ethical deliberation, the greater our ability to resolve conflicts that arise out of our passionate understanding of the best way to treat wildlife, while also caring for ourselves and the people with whom we work. I don't have precise data for rehabilitation organizations, however one recent study reported that up to 30-50% of conservation projects in Mexico fail not due to funding restrictions or

characteristics of the species or habitat, but due to interpersonal conflict and lack of social capital (Rubio-Espinosa 2010). The moral complexity of working with wildlife is staggering, and leads not just to social conflict, but also can cause burnout and stress.

A membership letter in January 2009 from the president of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Dr. James Cook, stated:

*At the same time I am worried that differing perspectives on animal welfare have the potential to do what earthquakes and hurricanes couldn't do..divide us. The AVMA has plenty of science-based information to help legislators decide and veterinarians lead on these complex issues, but that isn't enough. I need for you to listen respectfully to your colleagues and engage in a respectful exchange of ideas. We all see things in different ways, but we can't get mired in those differences to the extent that we lose sight of our common goals and veterinary oath.*

We need to find ways to engage in ethical issues, such as with respectful conversation. How we engage in ethical issues is as important as the ethical principles employed. Using the science of understanding humans and nonhumans gives us tools that help us more skillfully and effectively handle ethical situations. In this chapter we will review ethical principles as one framework for handling ethical issues and then investigate other frameworks and tools you can add to your wildlife medicine ethical kit.

## **Principal Ethical Approaches**

Learning ethics happens best when situated in real-life situations in which the participant is enmeshed. Ethics is best practiced when we choose real life circumstances that engage our moral sensibility. I invite you therefore to think of a situation involving wildlife that caused some confusion, conflict, or emotional reaction, for ethics is best practiced when we choose real life circumstances that engage our moral sensibility. Perhaps in your case you withdrew from the situation due to its complexity, or made a decision that in retrospect you think caused more harm than good.

Perhaps you are thinking of not having enough funding to pay your staff well or even take care of the animals

Or times when you are faced not having a place to house your animal, which is an abundant species - and hence you must consider euthanasia?

Or you might need to release of recovered individuals into subprime habitat or in less than optimal condition?

For the sake of clarity, I choose a common issue that often perplexes those who care for wildlife.

Imagine that you have been presented with a young Black-crowned Night Heron that was attached by a cat. She is depressed and might have a broken wing. You have never treated this species before. You are unfamiliar with how to diagnose, treat, house, and release this particular species. In addition, you don't have any funds to cover costs and money has been tight around the clinic recently. Finally, today is a very busy day and you don't know how much time you will

have to read up, go on line, or call someone to find about caring for the bird. Should you or any other accept the bird into your care, or in general, treat wildlife?

### *Utilitarianism*

Let's say you approach the situation of the heron from the viewpoint of utilitarian ethics. You make decisions based on terms of better or worse. You are basically approaching a case as a cost versus benefit analysis. You seek to choose a strategy that has the best effect on animal welfare. You are also looking to maximize good, which means considering the needs of humans. Whatever decision you make can be justified because the final outcome causes less harm than if you had not acted. The end result justifies the means.

In this case of the injured heron, you measure up where the suffering occurs. The heron is wild and you know little of how to care for the bird. She will suffer in your clinic. Yet the bird is suffering now. You and your staff will lose time and money to treat the bird. Yet you will gain experience and positive public relations if you accept the bird. You also really like herons and she is so beautiful. You'd really like to do the bird some good and learn more about herons by practicing on the bird. You figure that the bird will suffer more if you send it home with the kids who brought it in. You might call up the local rehabilitation clinic, but you know that they too don't have much experience in this species, are swamped with baby birds, and do not have many staff or financial resources. All in all you figure it is greater harm to not accept the bird, so you do.

Disadvantages of the utilitarian approach include trying to determine what suffering is allowable under what conditions. What might be construed as minimal harm by one, is maximum to another. It also purports that sentient beings are objects of welfare, and do not have intrinsic worth or value in and of themselves. In other words, animals and people can be used if the final result is the least harm and the most good for the most beings. This approach can lead to tough circumstances for individuals whose well being is sacrificed for the benefit of others. Often, animal welfare approaches to relating to animals fall under this principle.

### *Deontological Ethics*

This approach on the other hand lifts up the worth and dignity of every individual as the ultimate good. You might know this as Kantian ethics, named for Immanuel Kant. He said that humans have an intrinsic worth that is dignity and should therefore be treated always as an end and never merely as a means. The same applies for nonhumans. Basically this is a rule based on that one can say, "We never treat another in this way under any circumstances." Animals are not a means to an end.

With the heron then you might say that under no circumstances should the heron be treated with less than 100% care. This means that considerations of publicity, learning, beauty, your willingness to contribute, or finances do not come into the picture. Knowing that you cannot adequately care for the bird, you do not accept the bird into your clinic. Alternatively knowing this, you cancel the rest of your appointments and drive the bird to a wildlife clinic that

specializes in these kinds of birds. Alternatively you might also decide that there isn't anyone who can care for the bird adequately, so you euthanize the bird.

Criticism to this approach involves that absolute statements are difficult to consistently adhere to. For instance, we may say that herons should never suffer, yet we allow as citizens the presence of a hog production farm in our area whose grounds flooded last year and killed off a number of herons with the fecal pollution. Also, we might have competing rules at stake. For instance, you might say that herons should never suffer and that humans do not have the right to end the life of another. These two rules can complicate actions if you don't have a way to end the suffering without euthanasia. Animal rights stance often fall under deontological ethics.

### *Environmentalist/Respect for Nature*

Sometimes at odds with both deontological and utilitarian ethics is Environmentalism or "Respect for Nature." In this approach, humans have duties to species, not just to individual animals. Our moral concern is not whether a wild animal can live according to its evolved set of behaviors (deontological ethics says the individual animal has absolute integrity which cannot be violated) or what might cause the greatest harm to individuals or a group of individuals (utilitarianism). What we hold up as ultimate value is the extinction of a species, which is deplorable.

In our case of the heron, you might wonder, well, what species of heron is it? Is it common, threatened, or endangered? Is it non-native to the area? Is it hurting other native wildlife? If this heron is not threatened, then you might not be as concerned as if it were a rare bird, or was suffering population decline or some other environmental threat. You might also elect to not care for the bird, because it is just an individual. You use your resources for the survival of the whole species, such as donating your resources to conservation and environmental protection.

Criticism here lies in the fact that individuals might suffer as a result of actions that protect the species or the ecosystem as a whole, such as hunting deer or killing wolves. Who decides which individuals or which species merit less attention than other species or the ecosystem?

### *Virtue Ethics*

In virtue ethics we relate to animals in ways that makes us a virtuous person, or the best person we can. For instance, we say that a virtuous veterinarian cares for all animals. In the case of the heron, you would elect to treat the bird or do all you can in some way to care for the bird, regardless of your other commitments. Alternatively you could say that a virtuous veterinarian is prudent, and takes care of herself or himself, the staff, those she supports, and the working and financial success of the clinic. In this case you might not take the bird in or even spend much time with the bird to see that she was cared for. Not only might there be competing virtues, but as with the previous two examples, the ethical choice is based on human perception and not on the animal's.

### *Relational, Care, and Reverence for Life Ethics*

These are three approaches that are similar in some ways to virtue ethics because how an animal is cared for depends on how humans relate to the animal. In relational ethics, if we see our relationship to animals as stewards or as veterinarians, then we are inclined to take care of the heron. However, relational ethics does not tell us how to care for the bird, and does not take into account the individual bird. It is our relationship to the bird that matters most. With care ethics, we draw on our empathy and say if an animal suffers, then we are obligated to do all we can do to care for them. I believe that the care ethic is strong in wildlife rehabilitation, however, it places more emphasis on suffering and risks humans projecting their understanding of suffering upon another species. What if our sense of empathy is misplaced, or not even triggered? In these cases we might care for the heron and not pick up on the animals suffering at our own hands. Alternatively we might not "connect" with the bird and not be able to properly care for the animal because we see it as "not suffering."

The term "Reverence for Life" comes from Albert Schweitzer, who said, "In this sense, reverence for life is an absolute ethic. It does not lay down specific rules for each possible situation. It simply tells us that we are responsible for the lives about us. It does not set either maximum or minimum limits to what we must do." Criticism here comes from there being no absolute guide for what we may do. For instance, we might consider the heron the most amazing wonder on the planet of the earth. We are responsible for this bird, but also for all the other amazing species and individuals on the planet. How do we decide? Which animals "deserve" better care? Humans are inclined to offer greater reverence or compassion to those that look like us. We may wish to refrain from a speciesist stance in which we accord greater worth, respect, or care to one species over another. Our subconscious, however, evolved to recognize faces and care for those closely related to us, that may rule the day. For instance, the heron with her reserved stance and bird like ways might be more ignored or given less care or medication than say an injured chimpanzee that was brought to your clinic. If asked, you might not admit that the heron has less worth than another, however your actions of spending more time and money and effort on one species says otherwise.

Similar to reverence, Tomas Regan writes of inherent worth. For him, every species has a distinctive kind of value that is inherent in their existence. They are a cup that is precious in its own right, no matter what we might fill the cup with our definitions of "animal" or "species". No matter how we see the species, or imagine their thinking, feeling, behavior, and capacity to suffer, all species are valuable and have inherent worth (Regan 2004). It is not what our thinking, current philosophy, or cultural constructs that determine our care, but the existence of the animal her or himself.

### *Hybrid Ethical Views*

Even if we acknowledge that all beings have inherent worth and dignity, we are still faced with the fact that we treat species differently, and in a very real, pragmatic, and tragic sense we compromise our values consistently. In fact, the only consistent approach to ethics is that we all are inconsistent.

"The opportunity to combine elements.....does not, however, make it easier to formulate a plausible, logically consistent account of human duties to animal" (Sandoe 2008).

In all likelihood, most of us would approach the heron with a mixture of ethical approaches, if not all of them! One set of principles does not alone seem satisfactory, and yet a conglomeration of principles may be no less confusing and leave you straining to resolve the incompatible claims that each ethical approach demands.

My rational approach to ethics encompasses my belief that there is no rational, consistent approach to ethics. We make decisions all the time based on self interest, past experiences, and emotions that do not register in the cognitive realms. For instance, you might be experiencing a difficult day in that you are sick and had an argument with a family member or friend. Because you have less personal resources to give to a complex and time consuming situation such as treating the heron, you might on that day be more inclined to argue that the heron is not suffering or that it is okay to spend less time on the case than you might otherwise. Consciously if you give yourself time to think or research, you know that biology, physiology, and welfare science indicates that birds do feel stress and pain in therapeutic procedures. At a subconscious level, however, you might take short cuts in treatment or alternatively, compromise self care. Either way our subconscious is often the final decision maker in what we do. Hence, it behooves us to know all that we can about how humans think and feel so we can best challenge our assumptions in order to deliver best care to ourselves and others. In addition, learning all we can about nonhuman animals will impact our discernment of what we can do to positively impact their well being.

## **Understanding Humans**

Though we seek to understand humans as irrational beings, we should not dismiss a rational ethical approach that conforms to ethical principles. Rationality can refine and improve our choices and perhaps ease our own confusion or discomfort. We are largely influenced, however, by the culture around us in ways of which we are not aware. The greater our awareness of how we are influenced helps us understand not just ourselves, but others whose actions may be at odds with ours, or seem inconsistent. Understanding promotes empathy for ourselves and others, which in turn promotes greater ability to discuss ethics. Empathy opens space to increase our understanding of cultural influences, feelings, and thoughts, which in turn promotes greater empathy.

### *Humans as Feeling Animals*

Understanding human's emotive functioning guides us in discerning how we reason and interact socially (Briscoe 2008) . From earlier ape ancestors, humans inherited complex emotional responses hardwired to help us form social attachments and engage in care giving. The need for social attachments helped us not only raise our young, but offset the biology of earlier apes that leans towards freedom, autonomy, individualism, and ego (Turner 2000). While the earlier ape biology was successively adaptive to living somewhat individually in a subarctic niche in the forest, this way of living proved impractical as ape species radiated out in the Africa Savannah. There, human ancestors needed to support one another in complex social relationships so as to maintain social cohesion and reciprocity to combat predation and secure food. To grow in social complexity they also grew their ability for complex emotions. Since humans are hardwired for complex emotions, they are primed to form attachments in a large variety of forms, including those far from one's base family and community and extending out to other species. In tension

with this desire to form attachments is the individualism and ego of ape evolution, which influences any care situation such that the humans are also primed to seek benefits for themselves alone and to eschew community, including community of mixed species. Contrary to this, is the long evolution of human's reliance, connection, and love of biodiversity. We have developed an "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Turner 2008) and can respond to nonhuman animals with a sense of kinship and awe. This appreciation of life and the living world is known as biophilia.

Overlaying this evolved neural (limbic and cognitive) network to form attachments, is the capacity for culture to guide human moral concerns. This is in part because humans have evolved to use rituals to mobilize emotional energy for the benefit of community. In other words, rituals found in community gatherings, such as those in religious traditions, guide behavior for adhering to ethical codes and community taboos and strictures. Furthermore, the use of negative emotions such as guilt, shame, and fear developed for social cohesion, as did the use of positive emotions such as pride, satisfaction, and happiness (Goleman 2006). Based on the way humans evolved and the strong connection between the cortex and the subcortex, cognition or rational thinking partners with emotions, the limbic system, and subconscious thought-processing to impact our ethical codes and moral actions. In simple terms, a "low road" uses neural circuitry that runs through the amygdala and other similar automatic nodes without being conscious of it, and the "high road" sends messages to the prefrontal cortex where we can think about what is happening and intentionally impact our actions. The low road is always operating and indeed impacts all our decisions and actions. For this reason, a rational argument alone will not greatly impact human behavior, and indeed, rationality does not exist outside of the emotions that underlie our thinking.

Unfortunately research in the past has overlooked the role of affect and emotions in moral functioning (Zeidler 2004). Recently we have learned that care, empathy, and other relational based concerns impact learning and decision making, as does having a sense of safety and comfort. For instance, in one study girls put safety and comfort of both the suffering parties and the scientist in the forefront of their decision making more than boys (Zeidler 2004).

### *Humans as learning animals*

Knowing how emotions impact reasoning is but one factor to consider in social interactions. Intertwined with how we feel, is how we learn, and understanding how these two dance together tempers our plan for intentionally growing our capacity for ethical engagement.

A recently discovered brain cell, the mirror neuron, senses both the physical moves another person is about to make and their feelings, and prepares us to imitate that movement and feel with them. Mirror neurons exist throughout our lives, ever adapting to the social cues around and how we might care for others. When our body mimics the action of another person, we have a greater sense for what that person, or nonhuman animal felt. We are able to do this not through conceptual reasoning (high road) but through direct simulation; by feeling, not by thinking (the low road) (Goleman 2006).

Another recent understanding is how our brains have an incredible capacity to grow and to heal, even as we age and after terrible trauma (Bolte 2006). According to the theory of neuroplasticity; thinking, learning, and acting actually change both the brain's physical structure

and functional organization from top to bottom. This means that we heal after emotional and physical trauma to our brains and the potential to grow the ability to communicate, empathize, and think is always present. This is rather a paradigm shift in our understanding of the brain and brings hope as scientists get closer and closer to designing protocols and strategies to grow and heal brains of all ages. In other words, we can always learn and grow in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and understandings.

### *Humans in culture - specieism*

I have already mentioned how we view species differently, with a bias often towards those animals that most closely resemble humans. The result is that we treat different species differently, even though our values are to care for all species equally and accord them respect. The challenge to live according to our values is that we have subconscious and even conscious understandings of species that our culture constructs. For instance, herons and eagles may feel the same amount of pain, yet I'm guess that in most cases, eagles garner much more care and support than herons, or probably more than pigeons on English Sparrows (as evidenced by public spending or individual actions). This is known as speciesism, "a failure in attitude or practice, to accord any nonhuman being equal consideration and respect" (Dunayer 2004).

### *Human Dimensions of Wildlife and Conservation Psychology*

Besides specieism, there are many other ways that cultures construct how we view animals, and hence have us acting in all kinds of inconsistent ways. One aspect comes from the work in the science of human dimensions in wildlife. Here we see how values, ideology, and value orientations impact our behavior. Findings suggest that "values related to conformity, tradition, security, and self enhancement support utilitarian views toward wildlife, while values related to openness to change and self-transcendence support more protectionist, aesthetic, and mutualistic views toward wildlife" (Manfredo 2008). Depending how you emphasize these collections of values you might lean towards an utilitarian view (animals can be used as a means to an end) or mutualism (animals have worth in and of themselves and didn't evolve to be manipulated by humans).

People also diverge on ideological perceptions of wildlife. In hunter and gatherer societies, an egalitarian ideology was present. Wild species were fellow inhabitants of the of the same world. A domination ideology emerged with pastoral societies as hierarchies formed among people and between humans and nonhumans. This domination ideology underlies how humans see themselves separate from nature in modern times and facilitates the belief that humans' role is to exercise mastery over wildlife (Manfredo 2009).

Value orientations impact behavior as well. For instance, two different people might hold equally important the value of treating all living things humanely. Yet, this value might lead one person to euthanize the heron and the other to attempt to save her life. The difference is due to value orientation. Two value orientations direct a lot of thought about wildlife in North America (Manfredo 2009). One value orientation is domination and the other is egalitarian or mutualism. "The stronger one's domination orientation, the more likely he or she will be to prioritize human well being over wildlife, accept actions that result in death or other intrusive control of wildlife, and evaluate treatment of wildlife in utilitarian terms. A mutualism wildlife value orientation, in contrast, views wildlife as capable of living in relationships of trust with humans, as life-forms



having rights like those of humans, as part of an extended family, and as deserving caring and compassion." In the U.S. there is an increasing trend towards mutualism orientation away from domination, though both are prominent within our society.

The field of conservation psychology takes what we know about the science of human behavior and the interdependence between humans and nature and then seeks to promote a healthy and sustainable relationship (Clayton 2009). Conservation psychology persistently and deeply asks what is the human place in nature, and what is nature's place in the human being? These questions are asked so that we can sustain care. To care about an issue or a species people must be informed, people must feel, and "people should act in ways that express both their knowledge and their emotions" (Clayton 2009). Conservation psychology coaches people to care by integrating cognition, emotions, and behavior.

This is just a brief introduction to conservation psychology and the human dimensions of wildlife. Currently there are books, journals, conferences, websites, departments at Universities, and careers founded on how we understand humans in relation to other species, and how we can use that understanding to impact behavior. What we think and feel impacts behavior is an important aspect of ethical deliberation, because although we may "believe" one thing, our behavior is often inconsistent with our beliefs. Discussing ethical situations then is only one step in the process of ethics and wildlife. We must also seek to align our behavior with our values in community settings so we can check to see if we are spending more of our energy, resources, and time defending our ideological stances than in taking concrete steps to improve care for others. Though it is not possible for everyone involved in wildlife to become proficient with the sociological aspects of human and wildlife relationships, there is much merit in forming multidisciplinary teams that include social scientists or facilitators to help us navigate the complexity of human thinking and behavior.

## **Understanding Nonhumans**

### *Cognitive Ethology and Conservation Behavior*

Nonhumans also experience complex thinking, emotions, and behavior. In recent decades the field of cognitive ethology has emerged to help us determine what an animal experiences. Cognitive ethology "emphasizes observing animals under more-or-less natural conditions, with the objective of understanding the evolution, adaptation (function), causation, and development of the species-specific behavioral repertoire (Wikipedia 2011). In other words, as we study the subjective lives of animals we can better understand their levels of stress, suffering, or discomfort which informs us concretely of how our actions (or inactions) impact the well being of other species. By studying animal cognition we have tools to change attitude and perceptions of nonhuman animals in society and hence improve treatment (Mendi 2004).

Conservation behavior is the application of knowledge of animal behavior in order to solve wildlife conservation problems (Blumstein 2010). By knowing a species' social behavior, reproductive behavior, and antipredator (or predation) behavior, we can help design conservation strategies that take into account nonhuman cognition and behavior. Such strategies include rescue, rehabilitation, translocations, and reintroductions, and hence wildlife medicine.

### *Welfare Science*

The scientific approach to animal welfare is one framework that society can use to resolve questions about the proper treatment of animals. It works in conjunction with other frameworks within the broad range of ethical approaches, such as the theories, philosophies, and principles of ethics outlined in the beginning of this chapter. "The scientific study of animal welfare makes important and unique contributions to issues of animal ethics. It can be used to indicate and clarify problems, identify tradeoffs, evaluate alternatives, develop solutions, and build up an understanding of how life is experienced by animals themselves" (Fraser 2008). Keeping abreast of recent research in welfare science guides humans in determining the validity of our assumptions of animal well being, while also minimizing our propensity to project our own subjective experiences onto animals.

### **Compassion and Communication Tools for Engaging Ethical Complexity**

Determining what animals think, how they feel, and how they suffer through philosophical arguments, cognitive ethology, and welfare science must be part of our ethical decision making process. Ultimately however, we can never know what is "best" in the morass of ethical vagueness regarding nonhuman life. Instead, we can be compassionate in each moment by considering the needs of all species, which we can only do by having open and sustained discussions with our fellow humans. We might still make tragic choices, but less so. Every deliberation or application of wildlife medicine then becomes a practice ground for the skills of compassion and communication which impacts our delivery of ethical care. The following are some tools for improving communication and compassion.

#### *Narrative Ethics*

In narrative ethics, stories are told about ethical choices. While speaking the teller is able to clarify their own needs and values, as are the listeners. These stories take the form of case examples that highlight moral guides to living the good life, not just in practice of medicine but in all aspects of one's life. These narratives of witness with their experiential truth and passion, compel re-examination of accepted medical practices and ethical precepts, which in turns allows us as a community to develop our ethical abilities. Using narrative ethics which emphasizes communication does not preclude the use of principle ethics. Indeed, both contribute to understanding moral life and the process of ethical decision making in health care situations (McCarthy 2003).

In the case of the heron, members of the care team might gather to hear the case report of how decisions were made to care for the heron. There is no "right" or "wrong" ethical philosophy or principle here to determine. Instead, the process brings together every day humans struggling to make the best choice possible in the given situation.. In the process of telling, an internal dynamic interacting with emotions, cognition, past experiences, values, and cultural constructs align up with our actions so that we can take the best care possible of another.

#### *Socioscience*

Mark Twain once said, "The physician who knows only medicine, knows not even medicine." Socioscience guides the veterinary team member in knowing more than medicine. It is similar

to narrative ethics in that those in science and medicine take time out to examine the ethical implications of their work through intentional periods of presenting and discussing ethical case reports. During these case reports, socioscience stresses morality and ethics as well as the interdependence between science, medicine, and society. It does this by considering the psychological and epistemological growth of child or adult individual, and the development of character or virtue (Zeidler 2004). It focuses on growing the individual through relational challenges that focus on complex ethical situations and that involve science and human communities. Relational skills and growth are paramount because habits of mind may suffice for decisions and actions initiated by an individual, but do not suffice for real-life complex situations in today's world where the veterinarian strives for flourishing of self, family, staff, nonhuman animal, broader communities, global society, and earth habitats full of other species.

To arrive at the best possible decision or action, caregivers engage in situations that evoke collective decision-making through the joint construction of social knowledge. In other words, to fully develop an authentic understanding of the social issues, caregivers involved engage in challenging interactions that stress the pedagogical power of discourse, reasoned argumentation, explicit nature of science considerations, and emotive, developmental, culture or epistemological connections within the decisions and actions themselves.

Part of this process draws on personal beliefs, individual emotive characteristics, and individual identity within a community, such as gender and ethnicity. To engage in discourse that tugs at emotions, core beliefs, and identities, mutual respect and tolerance of dissenting views must be supported for the development of more sophisticated learning. Under all levels of discourse, we must examine how power and authority are embedded in scientific and medical enterprises, such as privilege, class, gender, and ethnicity. To truly engage in a socioscientific approach to wildlife medicine, it follows that "buttons must be pushed, lines must be crossed, and sensibilities must be challenged" (Zeidler 2007).

In practical terms, what a group of rehabilitators might do is hold monthly meetings that discuss the ethical and moral implications of their work. By coming together in this way the group grows their relational, listening, and dialogical skills, which bring greater coherence between their values, subconscious processes, and behavior towards one another and the animals in their care. A trained facilitator can help guide the group in both narrative ethics and in socioscience case reports, and encourage ever greater active listening and empathy.

### *Listening and communication as an ethical art in empathetic discourse*

Full listening helps us attune to others and their internal states. By stilling the cognitive loops and chatter that go on inside of us, we come to attentive recognition of what another is feeling, and have a greater chance to understand them and offer empathy. When another person feels heard and receives empathy, they in turn are in a better place to listen to you, as well as to recognize their own emotional state without it being overridden by concerns of threat from without.

Transformational reasoning occurs when one can clearly internalize and articulate the thoughts, arguments, or position of another. This is because one's reasoning becomes integrated with that of another (Zeidler 2004). In socioscience processes, we begin with the presentation of

controversial science or medical case studies and then participants take turns arguing various viewpoints. It is important to repeat back what one has heard and to argue the case you don't agree with. In this process of "pretending" to take the other side, one actually gains in empathy for other positions, and grows in sophistication with one's newly acquired and more integrated ethical approaches. Participants can also be urged to build consensus regarding the issue to further expand their abilities in discourse.

### *Needs Based Ethics and Compassionate Communication*

Compassionate Communication, based on Marshal Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication theory, emphasizes honesty and empathy in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Rosenberg ). Through practice it leads to shifts in thinking and emotional responses. It is based on the understanding that human beings operate best in social groups when they receive empathy. Greater connection and rapport between individuals, so paramount in social discourse, happens if language used and even deeper consciousness reflected in body language, is founded upon the idea of universal needs and not on judgment, blame, or domination to get needs met. Instead empathy through deep listening, authentic sharing of needs and feelings, and clear requests suggest the best strategy for people to come up with creative solutions where everyone is heard and has their needs considered, as well as the needs of nonhuman animals. Turner develops this theory by developing concrete ways that people can transact through the medium of needs to produce positive emotions and commitment (Turner 2002).

In Needs Based Ethics (NBE) what we do is integrate our mind's conscious and subconscious functions by keeping our hearts open to the needs of all beings. It is an ethic of com-*passion* in that we bring our feelings to the situation of ourselves and others so that we can empathize with others' needs. These needs aren't desires or strategies, but are universal and fundamental to the species in question.

In the case of the heron, we seek to empathize with the needs of everyone involved in the case:

The heron

Hérons as a species

Veterinarians

Veterinary team members

Rehabilitators

People who found the heron or care for the cats who attacked the heron

Family members of those working with the heron

Habitat and other species that evolved in balance with the heron (as prey and predators)

Individuals within local conservation and wildlife groups, such as preserves and the Audubon society

Yourself (as reader)

By equally considering the needs of all involved we can come up with creative, synergetic solutions that deliver the best care possible to the broadest constituency. This happens because keeping "all needs on the table" allows us to break free from ideological stances or cultural constructs that might normally restrain us, such as animal rights versus animal welfare, or domination versus mutualism. Instead we come into a spaciousness to hear one another, and

indeed listen to how life is coming through the very worthy lives of the species with which we share our communities. This does not insure that hard choices won't still be made. Even if the ultimate choices we make are regretful, such as euthanasia or trapping the feral cats living in the preserve, our work is sustained by connecting fully to the broad diversity of life around us.

### **Where Do We Go From Here - Next Steps**

Component ethical discourse cannot be achieved by reading this chapter, or even the thousands of tomes dedicated to ethics. It takes practice, hard work, and discomfort for our whole lives. We can always improve, and also, we are not static beings nor are others, our communities, or our science or medicine. Ethics cannot be achieved then by just one period of focus. You are not alone in this life long effort, because ethical discourse also cannot be done alone. It is a multidisciplinary effort that involves the community in which our wildlife medicine is embedded. The question of what to do next isn't then "What will I or you do?" but "What will we do, together?"

For future herons and other wildlife, there is much we can do together. We can work together to develop protocols within our institutions, or strengthen individual and community processes of support. We do this so that our care will be dictated by our ultimate values and the inherent value of other species, and not by the vagaries of our cultural influences and daily events.

#### *Possible Actions*

1. Organize a study group which reads and discusses relevant texts
2. Organize an ethical practice group to develop skills and confidence in ethical deliberation (and to challenge your unchecked assumptions)
3. If you belong to an organization, do #1 and #2 within your group
4. If you are individual, seek companions who will join you, or alternatively find a partner with whom to learn and confide
5. Present and discuss ethical case reports within your medical team
6. As NWRA, we can present ethical and human dimension lectures at meetings and provide opportunities to practice ethical deliberation at conferences and symposiums
7. As NWRA, we can form an ethical guidance committee to support these processes within the organization and to support members

### **Conclusion**

So what about the heron? Are you any closer to knowing what you would do in this case, or future cases? Specifically, does this chapter help you improve your clarity of thought, process of decision making, or application of care? I'd like to know, as I believe that we employ ethics as a community of wildlife care practitioners. In addition, I'd like to support you in your work, for in the nourishing of ourselves we can give more to the flourishing of all life. Even if you can't figure out how to take care of the very next wild animal you come across in your clinic, backyard, roadside, or preserve, then perhaps you'll be better prepared for the one after that, and the many to come. This chapter is just a beginning of a shared lifelong obligation as stated in the veterinary oath. I thank you for joining me and for the sake our earth and all its beings.

## THE VETERINARIAN'S OATH

*"Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, and conservation of livestock resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.*

*I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.*

*I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence."*

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