

A silhouette of a woman and a dog against a bright sunset. The woman is on the right, looking towards the dog on the left. She is touching the dog's face with her hand. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong backlight effect and lens flare. The overall mood is warm and intimate.

COUNCIL ON ANIMAL AFFAIRS

LOVE IS BLIND  
ESSAY

## The purpose and activities of the Council

The Council on Animal Affairs (Raad voor Dierenaangelegenheden, RDA) is an independent council of experts, which advises the Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food quality of the Netherlands. This advice is submitted on request and by the Council's own initiative regarding complex, multidisciplinary issues relating to animal health and welfare. The RDA currently comprises some forty experts with a wide range of backgrounds and expertise, who serve on the Council in a personal capacity, independently and without any outside influence.

The Council on Animal Affairs considers issues across the entire spectrum of animal policy: on captive (“domesticated”) and noncaptive (“wild”) animals, smallholding, or hobby farm animals, companion animals (pets), commercially raised animals and laboratory animals.

The Council records the conclusions of its deliberations in opinions. These documents provide an overview of the scientific and societal background to various issues, and include recommendations on policy options and avenues for resolving potential problems. Consensus is not a requirement for the inclusion of opinions; an opinion may contain views held by a minority of Council members.

## Preface

Where people and animals live together in a domestic environment, they are bound to develop ties of mutual affection. In many cases, both sides will be fine with that, but sometimes the love for an animal can become excessive to the point where the well-being of that animal is compromised.

In its report entitled *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands* (2019), the RDA discusses the shifting relationship between humans and animals. Two of its chapters – ‘Pets, passion and professionalism’ and ‘Animals are just like humans’ – deal with specific matters concerning this excessive love. This essay explores the theme of ‘blind love’ in some greater detail.

In it, the RDA considers the consequences of this increasing human identification with animals. We will highlight situations in which animals actually suffer from the love bestowed on them by humans, we will formulate suitable roles for the various parties involved and speculate on the potential societal consequences of a continuing anthropomorphic approach to animals. Our purpose is to promote a process of reflection, which should eventually result in new policy.

This calls for a fair degree of creativity: merely providing good quality information about the nature and needs of the animals concerned, while remaining as important as ever, will probably not suffice to persuade owners blinded by love to change their behaviour.

In addition to Council members, various external experts have been consulted for this essay, both by interviewing them and by adding an expert to the forum itself.

The Hague, March 2022



Jan Staman, Chair



Marc Schakenraad, Secretary to the Council

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COUNCIL ON ANIMAL AFFAIRS  
*The Netherlands*

# Love is blind

## Own initiative

**Question:** ‘The main question that we, the RDA, strived to answer was when love for an animal is “blind” to the extent that it actually harms the welfare of the animal concerned,’ according to forum chair Ruud Tombrock, RDA member and Executive Director for Europe of Humane Society International and Marjan Slob, author of this essay, RDA member and writer, philosopher and columnist. ‘Our approach was different from how we normally write our advisory reports. As scientific research in this field is still in its infancy, we were unable to produce a properly substantiated report. That’s why we decided to identify trends in relation to this subject in the form of an essay. It’s all about the love for animals, which can make people a little – or more than a little – blind. The focus is on animals in our own living environment. Love for animals has a lot of positive aspects. For example, it ensures that most of us take good care of our pets. The distance between humans and their pets has decreased considerably in recent years. The function of these animals is to be loved. People also keep animals because they are fascinated by them, for example in the case of fishes and reptiles, but the Council’s focus in this essay is on the emotional bond between humans and pets. The Council was curious to find out where the love for a pet actually becomes oppressive for the animal concerned,’ Tombrock and Slob point out. ‘So the Council certainly doesn’t object to love between humans and animals; this love can also be quite enjoyable for the animals. What we’re concerned about are the excesses.’

**Background:** Tombrock: ‘In an earlier report, The State of the Animal in the Netherlands, the Council repeatedly used the term “humanisation”. We found this such an interesting theme that the Council has now devoted an essay to it. It raises all sorts of questions, such as: Do you harm a dog when you make it wear a dog coat? We are not sure, but we do know that if you were

to forbid the dog to behave in a way that might get the coat dirty, you’d be depriving it of something essential. And that could certainly be harmful for the animal. Forbidding behaviour that might make the coat dirty is looking at animal behaviour through a human lens.’



drs. R.A. (Ruud) Tombrock  
(president)

Slob: ‘Punishing an animal for behaviour typical of its species is going too far and is bound to cause problems. Take the dogs’ habit of sniffing the intimate parts of each other’s bodies. It is perfectly normal for dogs to do that, but if we humans tell them not to because we’re embarrassed to see them behave like that, we may be harming the dog. That’s because we would prevent it from showing its natural behaviour, which could result in a sense of frustration in the dog.

Or take an owner who rewards his dog or cat with a piece of cake. That is wrong because you’re giving the animal the wrong type of food. It’ll get fat from that kind of food. Animals are not mini-humans; they’re animals. Our task in the Council is to draw attention to cases where an owner’s behaviour is a source of nuisance and frustration for an animal. Cases where the welfare of the animal is at stake.’

Another difficult subject is the issue of overbreeding for external features that we humans like so much. Take flat-faced dogs with extremely short snouts and big eyes. Tombrock: ‘We think they’re really cute, to us they almost look like a baby. But when breeders start breeding for desired features such as those, you’ll end up with dogs suffering from breathing disorders (BOAS) and headaches. We have scientific evidence for that, and it causes a lot of suffering for the animal concerned.

In the US more and more dogs are being put on anti-depressants; it's a huge trend. Some studies suggest that large numbers of dogs in the US are being given medicines like that. We think that is both remarkable and a cause for concern.' Are the animals being given those medicines to treat behavioural problems? Why do they have such problems? Why is the use of such medicines on the rise, and should we expect a similar trend in the Netherlands? These are important questions for further research.

**Considerations:** 'The starting point for the RDA is animal welfare,' says forum chair Ruud Tombrock. 'This calls for reflection on the quality of life as experienced by the animal concerned. The forum has organised various meetings, talked with experts in the Netherlands and abroad, and did a literature study. We have included those observations in this essay, stating the sources.'

**Recommendations:** The Council for Animal Affairs calls for a debate with various different parties and for policies to counteract this trend of blind love for animals that actually harms their welfare.

'We have not formulated any rock-solid recommendations,' Tombrock explains. 'Our principal aim is for parties, including - not least - the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality to become aware of the urgent needs among animals in this context. We are convinced of the need to provide animal owners with proper information about how to keep animals. At the same time we don't expect that good information will solve all problems. Even animal owners who have been carefully informed

about what makes their animals healthy and happy can get stuck in "old" patterns - simply because they have grown attached to a particular way of treating an animal. The RDA would be interested in further research into the psychological mechanisms at work in owners who smother their pets in love – precisely because those insights would help us design policies that might improve the fate of those animals. The question however is whether the RDA is the right body to conduct such research, because the focus of the research would be on humans, not animals.'

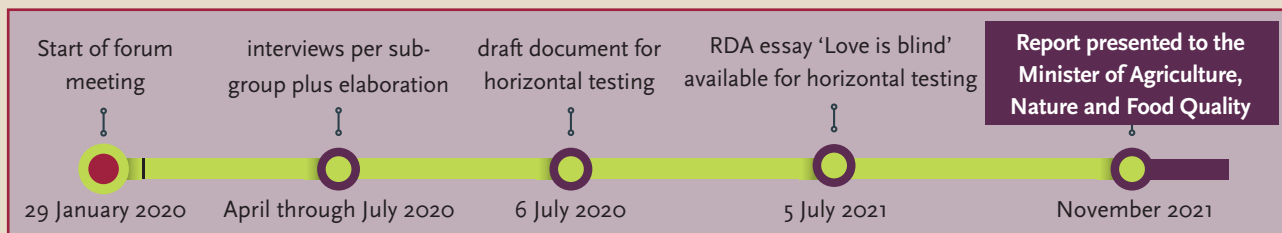
Slob adds: 'Following up on this essay we look forward to a dialogue with the parties involved. We'd be interested to hear if they recognise these notions of blind love and what they would want to do about it. For example, we'd like to talk to professionals such as breeders and vets.'

Tombrock: 'Perhaps additional regulation could help to stop certain practices, such as the import of dogs from abroad. It would also be useful to clarify existing legislation by giving precise definitions of harmful features, as was done very recently for flat-faced dogs and dogs with round heads. This is impossible without enforcement.'



drs. M. (Marjan) Slob

'If we ventured a prediction, we'd say that people will increasingly treat pets the way they treat children,' says Slob. Who knows, perhaps one day we'll take our pet to the pet health centre like we do with infants!



# Love is blind - Essay

## o Foreword

When people take an animal into their homes, that animal will inevitably become part of their intimate circle. In many cases both the animal and its owners will benefit. Sometimes however the welfare of the animal is compromised. Think of animals that are overfed, given clothes to wear and are required to behave 'decently'.

In this essay, the RDA explores the consequences of the increasing human identification with animals. We will highlight situations in which animals actually suffer from the love bestowed on them by humans, we will formulate suitable roles for the various parties involved and speculate on the potential societal consequences of a continuing anthropomorphic approach to animals. Our purpose is to promote a process of reflection which should eventually result in new policy. This calls for a fair degree of creativity: merely providing good quality information about the nature and needs of the animals concerned, while remaining as important as ever, will probably not suffice to persuade owners blinded by love to change their behaviour.

## 1 Question, approach and method

Humans and animals have a functional relationship: this is inevitable. We share our habitat with animals, most of us use animals for food (directly or indirectly) and we make animals work for us. We need animals for our survival. However, our relationship with animals is not *only* functional. We also feel love for animals, or at least for certain animals.

This emotional bond with animals has existed since times immemorial, as shown, for instance, in prehistoric cave paintings

reflecting a profound identification with the aurochs and other animals depicted. Certain developments however, which we will describe further on in this essay, have caused the emotional bond between humans and animals to increase (at least in the West). Overall this is good news for the animals, there can be no doubt about that. Even so, the animals we choose to live with depend on us in our relationship with them. How can we do justice to the true nature of an animal in such a love relationship? Could human love for an animal actually turn against the animal, and if so, in what forms? When is our love for an animal so totally blind that we actually compromise the animal's welfare? That is the question the RDA will try to answer in this essay.

To study the question in detail, we conducted a limited literature review and consulted a number of external experts. We discussed trends and changes in the relationship between humans and animals with these experts, and asked them if they could mention situations in which human love for animals is at odds with those animals' welfare. This study confronted us with a problem. While all the experts we consulted agreed that human affection for animals is growing and also that this affection can have a stifling effect on animals, so far this phenomenon has not been the subject of any broad and systematic empirical research. Likewise, our literature scan reveals a lack of robust quantitative data that we normally use as a foundation for our advisory reports. This is why we decided to write an essay instead. In the text below we explore a number of new perspectives for observing and considering the issue, and propose an initial, tentative arrangement of the various issues involved. According to the RDA, the observations and opinions about the interaction between humans and companion animals presented in this essay are noteworthy and interesting

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<sup>1</sup> A recent article even refers to an emerging 'petriarchate', playing on the English word for companion animal, 'pet'. <https://www.nzz.ch/wirtschaft/hunde-und-katzen-tierliebe-der-millennials-sorgt-fuer-boom-ld.1608680#back-register>

– if only to fuel the debate so as to encourage comments and refine viewpoints. Indeed, a debate like that can help explore this relatively ‘virgin’ territory.

Our anniversary publication, *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*, also included a reflection on some nefarious consequences of human love for animals<sup>2</sup>. The focus of this essay is subtly different, however. We have strictly limited our scope to the welfare of animals that we humans keep in order to fulfil our longing for animal companionship (which is why aquarium fish are not included, for example)<sup>3</sup>. Neither are we concerned here with the health risks arising from human cohabitation with animals. And while we fully acknowledge the profound psychological need of humans to live with animals, the precise nature of that need is not the subject of this essay. We regard that need as a given fact and concentrate instead on its effects on animal welfare.

## 2 History: from anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism

Until well into the twentieth century, it was felt to be ‘sentimental’ to assume that animals, like humans, might feel sensations and emotions. Since then, this view seems to have evolved almost into its complete opposite. Indeed, now that leading ethologists such as Frans de Waal do not hesitate to attribute ‘emotions’ and ‘political behaviour’ to primates, and YouTube videos showing logical reasoning in corvids and a sense of rhythm in sea lions attract millions of fascinated viewers<sup>4</sup>, it seems to have become more urgent to explain to the general public how the experiences of animals are *different* from ours.

While such differences certainly exist, they are gradual rather than absolute; there appear to be far more similarities than previously thought. Even animals far removed from us on the evolutionary tree, such as fish, have sensations<sup>5</sup>, and insects can sense injuries to their bodies – facts which, from an ethical perspective, should have consequences for how we treat these animals. And when it comes to mammals, we do not even have to call on our ethical awareness: our bodies empathise with them automatically. Thanks to the discovery of mirror neurons back in 1996, the ‘co-vibration’ with creatures resembling us is no longer seen as a sentimental delusion but counts as a serious neurobiological hypothesis. According to this theory, as soon as the mirror neurons fire we literally feel a sense of kinship, before our reasoning comes into play. By extension, it is no longer felt to be wildly eccentric to assume that cohabitation with the animals we identify with spontaneously actually deepens our human existence.

In short, in recent decades we have seen a shift from *anthropocentrism* (in which human interests take centre stage) to *anthropomorphism* (the tendency to understand animals from a human mental framework and to assign human characteristics to animals). This is not to say that anthropomorphism is the only perspective in society today. In many practices it is not even the dominant perspective. However, the anthropomorphic perspective is gaining strength and influence, and this trend looks set to continue. In principle, this is good news for the animals. After all, anthropomorphism will make people want to relieve or eliminate the suffering of animals because they empathise with them.

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<sup>2</sup> *Staat van het dier: beschouwingen en opinies over de verschuivende relatie tussen mens en dier in Nederland* (The State of the Animal: Reflections and opinions on the shifting relationship between people and animals in the Netherlands). Schukken, J.C.M. van Trijp, J.J.M. van Alphen, H. Hopster (eds). Council on Animal Affairs, 2019. In particular, see Chapter 5: ‘Pets, passion and professionalism: reflection on companion and hobby animals.’

<sup>3</sup> So-called assistance, status and fascination animals are excluded, therefore. While many of these animals do live in their owner’s home and qualify as pets in that regard, the dynamics between these animals and their owners are very different compared with companion animals. And because those very dynamics are central to this essay, we will consistently use the term ‘companion animals’ below. However, wherever the interviewees used the more common term ‘pet’, we did the same.

<sup>4</sup> For smart crows, see for example [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrONJloaIqU@ab\\_channel=BBCEarth](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrONJloaIqU@ab_channel=BBCEarth). For swinging sea lions, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YisjjeKK8a@ab\\_channel=PinnipedLab](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YisjjeKK8a@ab_channel=PinnipedLab).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the RDA advisory report *The welfare of fish* (2018).



So our love for animals is a spontaneous emotion and is of all times and all places. However, living with animals in our homes is not. Until the late eighteenth / early nineteenth centuries, cats were usually kept outside and dogs too were rarely allowed in the home. It is true that the elite already began to keep dogs indoors in the seventeenth century, says art historian and World Animal Protection director Dirk-Jan Verdonk. But this was a privilege that was denied to the poor, based on the argument that they were hardly able to care for themselves, let alone for animals. 'The very fact that the poor were explicitly prohibited from keeping animals shows that the urge certainly existed,' Verdonk concludes.

As we became more prosperous, keeping animals purely because of the pleasure they give us came within the reach of larger groups of people. Demographic developments are also likely to have contributed to the growing importance of companion animals. Over the past decades, households have become much smaller. American science journalist David Grimm speculates that, as it has become quite rare for multiple generations to live in the same house, we increasingly tend to focus our affection impulses on companion animals instead<sup>6</sup>. Veterinarian Erik Teske points to yet another emotion pattern: the huge importance that socially weak individuals in particular tend to attach to a companion animal. 'A pet makes no judgments', is how he explains this phenomenon.

The most important factor that made people admit animals to their homes, says Grimm, is a range of simple technological innovations such as dog shampoo, anti-flea drops and the cat box, which was invented in 1947. These innovations have made our intimate cohabitation with these previously 'dirty' animals a lot easier and more agreeable. Even people living in small city apartments could now keep animals, so even relentless urbanisation has not been able to break the bond between animals and humans. And by bringing animals into our homes, we have

also radically changed our relationship with them. Grimm: 'Everyone who lives with us under the same roof is a housemate by definition: a family member.' An intimate relationship with animals changes our understanding of those animals almost automatically. And that, in turn, is reflected in how we interact with them. In the past we would throw a bone to a nameless cat in the yard, but today we treat Simba to free-range meat on a tray.

Grimm believes that companion animals have come to play an important role in the emotional lives of millions of people. 'Even if we'd all suddenly become a lot poorer, we wouldn't throw out our dogs and cats. Our bond with them has become too strong; we've crossed a point of no return.' This love has become so inescapable that even the makers of science-fiction series *Star Trek* have found it impossible to ignore companion animals. In the most recent series, from 2020, a cat named Grudge is sent into space with its owners.

### 3. When incorporation becomes problematic

As soon as an animal comes to live with us in our home, our anthropomorphic disposition will make us regard it as a member of the family. Most of these animals live their lives in luxury. David Grimm: 'They enjoy a permanent holiday, they never have to work for their food.' Sometimes however this incorporation into human existence works out unfavourably for the animal concerned, when they 'are forced to meet expectations that are at odds with their intrinsic nature,' says social psychologist Roos Vonk. Once we regard an animal as 'one of us', we can make serious mistakes in interpreting their behaviour, observing feelings and intentions that are not really there. And it is quite difficult to correct those assumptions, because we are often not even aware that we make them.

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<sup>6</sup> Millennials in particular keep pets in order to try and relieve their loneliness, according to the article from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* quoted above. <https://www.nzz.ch/wirtschaft/hunde-und-katzen-tierliebe-der-millennials-sorgt-fuer-boom-ld.1608680#back-register>



Such distorted views of reality are not necessarily problematic for the animals concerned. They do become problematic, however, when people try to *obstruct or punish* types of behaviour that are intrinsic to the species, or develop methods of *caring for or spoiling* companion animals that actually harm the animals' health or welfare. This type of 'animal abuse' is historically new. A cat, a dog or a rabbit will always remain a cat, a dog or a rabbit, not a hairy baby. Below we will briefly outline several problematic practices that excessive incorporation of animals may lead to.

### **Embarrassing animals**

We allow and actually like having our new housemates around us, but only if they behave well. 'We are beginning to impose our own norms and values on our pets,' according to Professor of Public Understanding of Science and RDA member Bas Haring. Environmental philosopher Josef Keulartz has identified the potential practical outcomes of this in practice. Some forms of natural animal behaviour (Keulartz mentions parasitism, predation and cannibalism) are 'offensive' to us<sup>7</sup>. Our housemates have no scruples about tearing apart their prey or having sex in public. A dog or a cat carefully licking its anus in full view of the visitors will make many of us feel awkward. We feel ashamed for the animal, just like we would feel ashamed for indecent behaviour of our children. Not surprisingly, some owners will try to repress those types of behaviour, potentially resulting in considerable frustration on the part of the animal. After all, cats will spray: it is their way of marking their territory. A dog of a breed that has been selected for vigilance for centuries will bark when the doorbell rings and will tend to mistrust visitors. It is pointless to reproach the dog for being inhospitable. And dogs love wallowing in the mud, they will sometimes eat turds and sniff the genitals of other dogs. We may assume that animals feel safe and at ease when they are allowed to

behave naturally. However, some owners snatch their dog away as soon as its nose moves in the direction of another dog's genitals (and even faster when it seeks out a human's crotch). This is not to say that we should necessarily feel sorry for an animal whose behaviour is being corrected. After all, the price we pay for living in a social group is that we accept corrections of our behaviour<sup>8</sup>. However, any attempts by humans to obstruct behaviours that are healthy, social and assertive for the species concerned will undoubtedly result in frustration on the part of the animal.

### **Unruly animals**

People sometimes attribute intentions to the behaviour of their animals which in reality do not exist. 'When a young horse during breaking-in flattens its ears and jumps away, this is sometimes seen as unruly behaviour, but actually the horse is probably confused as to what it is expected to do,' according to *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*<sup>9</sup>. And when an owner comes home and finds scratches in the door made by the dog during his absence, he will make his dog feel very unhappy when he scolds it. The dog will certainly try hard to understand its master, but no matter how attentively it watches him utter a reprimand in proper grammatical sentences, the chance that the dog actually feels 'guilty' for its 'unruly' behaviour is virtually nil, due to the reference framework of the dog and the nature of its memory.

Impatience on the part of the owner can likewise be detrimental to a dog. Hasty owners who do not allow their dogs to sniff out an interesting trail but simply want to move on, actually deprive the dog from important social experiences. 'Pulling a dog away from a scent trail is like preventing a person from reading emails that pop up in their mailbox,' says Roos Vonk. Animals can get seriously frustrated if their owner does not understand their behaviour<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Page 92, Josef Keulartz, Boommensen (published by Noordboek, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> An argument put forward by Christine Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 233.

<sup>9</sup> *op.cit.* p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Reliable statistics are hard to come by. The Veterinary Memorandum on behavioural problems in dogs (2019) cites Danish studies showing that 23.6% of euthanised dogs were killed due to problems with their behaviour. And three quarters of all adopted dogs that were sent back to the asylum proved to be unmanageable in the home due, again, to behavioural problems.

Many dog owners, for example, think their leashed dog is being dominant when it charges for another dog, and will punish the animal by slapping it or by pulling the leash. However, in most cases what the dog feels in such a situation is not dominance but fear. When its owner then actually punishes it for trying to bark the intimidating dog away, its fear for the animal will only increase.



Photo: Mediatheek Rijksoverheid

### **Bored animals**

One important cause of ‘undesirable’ behaviour in pets is boredom. Just hanging around without having anything to do is boring – even in a resort. Intelligent hunters such as cats and dogs will start to destroy things if there is little else for them to do. Many cats never go outside, many hounds never go hunting any more, and that sweet little rabbit that seems to be so pleased when its owner comes home may spend 23 hours a day alone in its hutch. Roos Vonk: ‘Small wonder the animal is so pleased. At last something happens!’ She argues that owners should ask themselves how the rabbit feels during all those hours that they cannot spend with it.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.startpunthonden.nl/nieuwsartikel/307/depressieve-honden-aan-de-antidepressiva>.

<sup>12</sup> op.cit. p. 74.

The market for animals with mental problems is growing, and conditions such as ADHD and depression are now also diagnosed in animals. For example, there is a veal-flavoured medicine called Reconcile – what’s in a name – that can ‘cure’ dogs from their depression. ‘Over ten million dogs in the US have unusual symptoms due to the long absence of their owners during the day. So it’s great to have a product that is able to restore the bond between dogs and their owners,’ says a jubilant spokesperson of pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly<sup>11</sup>. Clomicalm, an antidepressant for dogs, is now also available on the Dutch market. There is a perverse aspect to this development, because even though we know the causes, we end up fighting the symptoms.

### **Spoiled animals**

People who love their animal will want to take good care of it and are inclined to spoil it. The animal will benefit as long as ‘good care’ means taking Bella to the vet when she is ill, and as long as ‘spoiling’ means taking Charlie out for an extra long walk. Sometimes however, owners care for and spoil their animals in ways that hinder rather than help them. For example, on the AliExpress website owners can order a ‘cute’ little dress or raincoat for a dog, with a little bonnet to match. And there is a range of charming sweaters in fashionable colours for cats. ‘Father Christmas hats, pants for dogs in heat, panty shields, jewellery for pets – we sometimes seem to forget that animals belong to a different species. This becomes problematic once the animal can no longer be an animal; when the dog is kept away from a sandy path because the mud would spoil its cute little jacket,’ according to *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*<sup>12</sup>.



Photo: Pixabay

Garments are not the only things that animals may experience as a nuisance. For example, animal species known for their solitary lifestyle, such as most cats and some species of hamster, can actually experience stress when forced to live with a 'playmate'. The opposite problem occurs when we impose solitary confinement on gregarious animals that like living in groups, such as rabbits, rats, guinea pigs and horses.

The most widespread and most enticing practice however of spoiling animals in ways that are unlikely to benefit them, involves the stomach. When we have something to celebrate, we feel sorry for the dog if it does not also get a piece of the cake. 'People buy love by giving treats and train their animals

with titbits,' says Ronald Corbee, specialist in Clinical Nutrition of Companion Animals. According to Corbee, begging for attention is often misunderstood for begging for a treat. This has resulted in growing obesity problems among companion animals. In the 1990s, an estimated 35% of dogs in the Netherlands were overweight. Recent studies have yielded figures ranging from 40% to 60%. Owners of dogs with a healthy weight are sometimes actually called to account for the 'emaciated' appearance of their dogs; people are simply not used to seeing slender dogs around anymore. Between 11% and 27% of all cats are now obese, and the number of overweight horses also seems to be increasing.

We should be careful however to use qualifications of this type. 'Too fat' is a normative statement, Bas Haring points out. In his view, our disapproval of fat companion animals is itself an interesting form of anthropomorphism, as it shows we also apply our aesthetic norms to animals. It is true that as long as the animals themselves are not bothered by their excess fat, it is the owner, not the animal, that may have a problem. Fat animals are not likely to be stigmatised by others. However, overweight does have potential adverse effects on their health. Fat animals have shorter average life spans. Many obese horses, cats and rabbits develop diabetes mellitus and fatty liver disease, and vascular conditions and arthrosis are also more common among obese animals. As animals become less mobile as they grow fat, they also age faster. Interestingly, studies point to a connection between overfeeding and anthropomorphism; the owners of obese dogs are more likely to regard their dog as a child, to sleep with it in one bed, to talk to it frequently and to spend more time with the animal<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Bjornvad, C.R., Gloor, S., Johansen, S.S., Sandoe, P., Lund, T.B. (2019) Neutering increases risk of obesity in male dogs but not in bitches- A cross-sectional study of dog – and owner-related risk factors for obesity in Danish companion dogs. *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*, Vol. 170, pp. 1-12. Kienzle, E., Bergler, R., Mandernach, A. (1998). A comparison of the feeding behavior and the human-animal relationship in owners of normal and obese dogs. *J. Nutr.*, Vol. 128, pp. 2779S-2782S. German, A.J., Blackwell, E., Evans, M., Westgarth, C. (2017). Overweight dogs are more likely to display undesirable behaviours: result of a large online survey of dog owners in the UK. *J.Nutr.Sci.*, vol. 6, e14.

It is not just dogs and cats but also rabbits, guinea pigs and birds that develop lifestyle diseases. This happens when the animals get too little exercise and are overfed. Rabbit owners often fill their animal's food tray as soon as it is empty. As a result, the rabbits eat less hay, which can lead to dental problems. While the 'complete feed' (known as pellets) developed for these animals provides a balanced diet, many people actually believe it is the pellets that are incomplete, according to Yvonne van Zeeland, a vet specialising in birds. Many owners feel sorry for their animals when they only get the same pellets every day. Manufacturers have responded by producing pellets in different colours. These may satisfy the need for visual variation on the part of the buyers (and animals), but they contain exactly the same nutrients.

Among humans, food is becoming ever more closely associated with lifestyle, or even with one's philosophy of life. In a parallel development, demand for vegetarian and vegan animal feed has increased in recent years<sup>14</sup>. Some owners apparently impose their own lifestyle on their companion animals: 'We don't eat meat, gluten or animal products in this house!' There are no exact figures for the number of animals that are being fed on vegetarian or vegan feed<sup>15</sup>. However, the RDA survey revealed that no less than 18%<sup>16</sup> of respondents are of the opinion that even carnivorous animals like dogs and cats should only be given vegetarian food. It is difficult to compose a vegetarian or vegan diet for a dog, let alone for strict carnivores such as cats. Cats have to obtain certain nutrients from animal proteins

that other mammals (including dogs) can make themselves. A vegetarian diet probably increases the pH of a cat's urine (in other words, the urine becomes less acid), resulting in an increased risk of bladder crystals<sup>17</sup>. Dogs and cats that do not consume animal proteins are more likely to develop retinal disorders and cardiomyopathy<sup>18</sup>.

Owners at the other end of the food lifestyle spectrum think that the best treat they can give their pet is raw meat. This trend, which originated in Australia, is especially popular among people who aspire to live 'naturally'. Some breeders actually enter into a kind of contract with the buyer, who promises to feed the pup or kitten exclusively on raw meat. However, raw meat may contain bacteria and parasites that are dangerous for both humans and animals<sup>19</sup>. In addition, animals on this diet risk getting too little variation in nutrients, which, without feed supplements, could potentially result in certain vitamin and mineral deficits. Again, this shows that we sometimes allow our human convictions on 'correct' lifestyles to prevail over the animal's actual needs.

### ***Susceptible animals***

Another hotly debated and highly controversial ideological issue is whether or not to vaccinate, and here too the battle is transposed to companion animals. In the Netherlands, owners are free to decide whether they want their companion animal to be vaccinated or not<sup>20</sup>. Effective protection of a population requires a high vaccination rate, which is not currently achieved<sup>21</sup>. The vaccination rate for cats is even lower

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<sup>14</sup> Rothgerber, H. (2013). *A meaty matter. Pet diet and the vegetarian's dilemma*. Appetite, Vol. 68, pp. 72-82. Brown, W.Y. (2009). *Nutritional and ethical issues regarding vegetarianism in the domestic dog*. p. 137

<sup>15</sup> The article 'Plant based (vegan) diets for pets: A survey of pet-owners attitudes and feeding practices', Sarah Dodd et al., Plos ONE, 2019 (open access), sheds some more light on the issue.

<sup>16</sup> op.cit. p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Wakefield, A., Shofer, S., Michel, E. (2006). *Evaluation of cats fed vegetarian diets and attitudes of their caregivers*. JAVMA, Vol.229:1, pp. 70-73.

<sup>18</sup> Hayes, K.C., Trautwein, E.A. (1989). Taurine deficiency syndrome in cats. Vet Clin North Am Small Anim Pract, Vol. 19, pp. 404-413. Adin, D., DeFranscesco, T., Keene, B., Tou, S., Meurs, K., Atkins, C., Aona, B., Kurtz, K., Barron, L., Saker, K. (2019). Echocardiographic phenotype of canine dilated cardiomyopathy differs based on diet type. Journal of Veterinary Cardiology, Vol. 21, pp. 1-9.

<sup>19</sup> Sector association Dibevo is currently developing a quality label for raw meat.

<sup>20</sup> There is one exception: dogs can only be taken abroad if vaccinated against rabies.

<sup>21</sup> The exact percentage of vaccinated animals required to contain a disease is hard to determine and also depends on the illness concerned. The experts we consulted did however confirm that the required vaccination rate is not being achieved; the number of vaccinated animals is far too low for that.

than that for dogs<sup>22</sup>. Some experts have the impression that the vaccination rate is actually decreasing. Sociologist Josje ten Kate: 'Resistance to the vaccination of pets is especially prevalent among owners who want to return to nature and owners with a critical attitude towards science and its "vested interests". Their arguments very much resemble those used against human vaccination.' At the other end of the ideological spectrum, veterinary medicines manufacturer Peter Mijten points to an increasing willingness among owners to subject their dogs not only to standard vaccinations, but also to vaccination against infectious cough or leptospirosis.

### **Sick animals**

Not long ago a satirical show on Dutch TV made fun of vets sending a 'Get well soon!' card to the home address of a guinea pig they had treated. The show highlighted a typical symptom of our age: today, vets cannot (or cannot afford to) ignore the emotional bond between the owner and his or her companion animal. That bond has drastically changed their profession. In the eighteenth century, a vet was only consulted to help a sick horse or some other large production animal whose economic value was usually greater than the vet's fee. Not surprisingly, the advent of tractors and cars in the 1920s and 1930s caused considerable alarm among vets, who feared a massive drop in income. 'Vets who decided to focus on dogs and cats instead were ridiculed as nobody believed there was any money in that,' says David Grimm. He argues that vets have since been able to build 'their careers on the sentimental relationship between humans and pets'. They have modern veterinary clinics at their disposal, filled to the brim with scanning and surgery equipment, specially intended for companion animals. Even organ transplants and chemotherapy are now among the options available. Grimm: 'After all, you'd do anything to help

your child, so if you see your pet as a child... People have been known to increase the mortgage on their house only to be able to pay the vet.'

Modern-day owners have high demands of veterinary care and will buy it even if the price is high. The average dog or cat owner is prepared to spend 750 to 850 euros to save their pet, according to *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*<sup>23</sup>. This has also generated a range of animal insurance policies. An estimated 4% of companion animals in the Netherlands are insured, particularly dogs<sup>24</sup>. This figure is low compared to Scandinavian countries, where some three quarters of all companion animals are covered by health insurance, but it is rising steadily<sup>25</sup>.

While there is no doubt that most animals will benefit from a visit to the vet, it seems that a new balance is yet to be found. To what lengths are you prepared to go in seeking medical assistance for your animal? Where do you draw the line and say: this intervention is too expensive for me? A person named 'Beer' submitted this very question to the forum of a parents' website, ouders.nl. His son's guinea pig had a tooth abscess and the vet gave him all sorts of expensive medicines and even suggested dental surgery. Should he go in for that? Most respondents seemed to feel: 'Yes, as long as you can afford it.' After all, you have assumed responsibility for taking care of the animal. Even so, the forum sensed that things were rather out of balance. 'Danielle1971' says that she once bought a guinea pig for 10 euros 'from a small breeder' and had since spent 300 euros on that same animal for the treatment of eye damage. And the family were not given much time to enjoy the investment, as the guinea pig was snatched from the garden by a bird of prey soon after. However: Danielle 'wouldn't hesitate

<sup>22</sup> <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2289201-inenting-angst-de-vaccinatiegraad-daalt-on-der-huisdieren.html>

<sup>23</sup> O.P.CIT. P. 71.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/4994671/konijn-verzekering-hond-kat-huisdier-geld-declaratie-instagram>.

<sup>25</sup> Insurance company Reaal Dier & Zorg registered a 33% rise in 2019 relative to 2018.

to do it again'. The idea that you owe it to your pet to 'go to any lengths' in terms of medical care has 'taken root in the minds of the masses', RDA forum member Miriam Lavell points out. The vets themselves do not propagate continued treatment, says Lavell, dryly adding that 'they don't need to. It's enough for them to list all the remaining options'<sup>26</sup>.

So spending on medical care for animals has increased considerably. Nevertheless, a small proportion of people who buy a companion animal are not prepared to look after it until its death. And a far bigger group of owners simply do not have the financial means to do so. Even if the numbers are relatively small, every year thousands of animals do not receive the medical care they need, according to *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*<sup>27</sup>. These animals 'are sent to shelters or disappear in the online trade'. Majori Meijer and Marjolein Schröder of the Amsterdam Animal Shelter (DOA) confirm they are sometimes asked to adopt sick animals whose owners are unable or unwilling to pay for medical treatment. So the increasing availability of medical treatment options for animals, ironically, may encourage owners who cannot afford such treatment not to have their pet euthanised but take it to a shelter instead – which rarely benefits the welfare of the animal concerned.

Medical aid is a blessing for any animal that is suffering. However, endless treatment of sick animals can harm their welfare. This is the case when the medical treatment is no longer in the interest of the animal, but mainly serves the interest of owners who have grown so attached to the animal that they simply cannot part with it. 'Endless treatment in order to avoid making the choice for euthanasia can have serious consequences for animal welfare,' according to *The State of*

*the Animal in the Netherlands*. While a dog with chronic joint problems can still lead a fairly pleasant life, it is likely to need effective painkillers and special feed. Not all owners will be able to afford such long-term extra costs. The result is permanent suffering on the part of the animal. A cat with advanced renal failure that is taken in its basket to the vet for weekly infusion therapy will find no comfort in the explanation that it is bound to feel better for a few days after each treatment.

Meijer and Schröder of the Amsterdam Animal Shelter have seen attitudes on euthanasia change over time. 'We're now trying to keep animals alive that we would have put to sleep for medical reasons ten or fifteen years ago.' For them, the criteria for euthanasia are clear: treatment should only be provided if the animal has sufficient quality of life and is able to perform important actions without pain. But even the vets that the Amsterdam Animal Shelter works with have different interpretations of those criteria. 'Staff members with a strong preference for a specific outcome know exactly which of the vets they should submit a case to in order to achieve that outcome,' according to Meijer and Schröder.

*Dierbaren (Loved Ones)*, the wonderful documentary by Saskia Gubbels about the Amsterdam Animal Shelter<sup>28</sup>, shows that staff almost experience it as a personal failure when an animal needs to be euthanised because it is too ill or – more painful still – because it has too many behavioural problems ever to be able to lead a pleasant life. The shelter has many problematic dogs, including fighting dogs, and it is up to dog behaviour therapist Meijer to try to change their behaviour. If a dog seems insecure or frightened, she thinks there is still a chance. But some dogs will attack another dog across the street, or bite a human in the hand to the bone even without

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ouders.nl/forum/off-topic-discussies/dierenartskosten-voor-een-knaagdier-tot-hoe-veer-ga-je-en-wat-is-normaal>

<sup>27</sup> op.cit. p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Dierbaren*, Saskia Gubbels, 2020. <https://www.zdoc.nl/documentaires/series/zdoc/2020/dierbaren.html>.





Photo: Mediatheek Rijksoverheid

the slightest provocation. 'If the team doesn't *dare* to move a dog to another home, then frankly its situation is hopeless,' says Meijer. Sometimes the Amsterdam Animal Shelter decides that it is better for the animal 'to go to heaven'<sup>29</sup>. But they do not take that decision lightly. First the team members each formulate their own viewpoint independently, and then they have a team discussion. However, society finds it hard to accept that sometimes euthanasia is the only realistic option. This is confirmed in *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*: there is 'little support in society for the practice of putting animals to sleep if no new boss can be found for them'. Only 18% of respondents felt it was acceptable to kill an animal if no suitable home was found for it within half a year<sup>30</sup>. However, nobody offered a practical alternative for animals that are unmanageable and cannot be relocated.

### **Overbred animals**

'Dogs are there in all shapes and sizes, literally bred for all requirements – from lapdogs that, as an aunt of mine once put it, "set your milk flowing", to huge animals compared with which any macho looks like a milksop,' says biologist Midas Dekkers in his unmistakable jargon<sup>31</sup>. The practice of breeding dogs for a wide variety of human needs is a theme beyond the scope of this essay. Here we are only concerned with the fate of animals that are bred for features that make our hearts melt. 'An overwhelming majority of pet owners regard their pet as a family member that usually fulfils the role of a child,' says philosopher Josef Keulartz based on several studies. These owners adore childlike characteristics in their animals, a phenomenon that Keulartz refers to as 'pedomorphism'<sup>32</sup>. Small wonder, then, that breeds which already show such features are selected for a particularly 'childlike' appearance: small animals with large

<sup>29</sup> This is the phrase used in the documentary *Dierbaren* (Loved Ones).

<sup>30</sup> op.cit. p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Midas Dekkers, *Lief dier: over bestialiteit* (*Dearest pet: On bestiality*). Uitgeverij Contact, 2008, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> Josef Keulartz, *Boommensen: over nut en nadeel van de humanisering van de natuur*. Noordboek, 2020, p. 16.



bulging eyes and short snouts. Sometimes these practices result in health problems. Many flat-faced dogs have difficulty breathing, and many of those cute little dogs suffer from skull disorders resulting in chronic headache. And while many owners are aware of this, they accept these burdens on the animal as a problem that ‘simply’ comes with the breed, and will not hesitate to buy a dog of the same breed when their loved one has died. However, this burden is far from natural for the animals concerned; on the contrary, it is the result of a deliberate breeding programme for such features. For example, the skull and nostrils of an English bulldog today are totally different from what they looked like a century ago. ‘A tragedy in multiple acts,’ is how breeding specialist Ed Gubbels summarises the breeding history of bulldogs. He points out that some breeders actually relish the attention and sympathy bestowed on them on social media after yet another suffering (and often predictably ‘failed’) litter. Gubbels typifies this as ‘Munchausen syndrome by proxy projected on animals’. In any case, an event like that is no reason for such breeders to go for a different parent combination next time.

Breeding programmes that select for external features which are harmful to the animal are beginning to attract more attention, and legislation is being put in place to curb the worst excesses<sup>33</sup>. So far there has been less attention for breeding programmes that select for specific character traits. Gregory Berns, an American scientist who studies dogs, is particularly worried about the elimination of aggression in such programmes. Selecting for non-aggression can also benefit the animals themselves. For example, less aggressive animals do not need to be restrained so much, which presumably makes their lives more pleasant. However, since aggression usually has a function, it can be problematic if a dog has too little of it. ‘Aggression can be a suitable response in



Photo: Pixabay

a situation where the animal has to defend itself,’ says Berns, ‘so selecting for less aggression will put the dog at a disadvantage.’ An animal needs to be able to defend its interests; so if breeding for less aggression results in animals that do not fight in defence, we saddle them with another problem. One would hope that every owner understands that. However, in some people a shivering, vulnerable animal provokes a warm protective impulse that is evidently rather addictive. ‘This impulse can result in the breeding of fearful, anxious animals,’ according to animal ethicist James Serpell. ‘Which would be perverse.’ Due to the lack of information about the incidence of breeding for helpless animals, the scope of the problem will remain unclear for the time being.

#### 4. Roles and responsibilities

So who should take responsibility for which aspects of the excesses of our love for animals? Following up on our consultation of experts, we have compiled an initial overview of the various parties that could or perhaps should take on specific tasks.

<sup>33</sup> Section 3.4 of the Animal Husbandry Decree (*Besluit houders van dieren*), which took effect in 2014, prohibits the breeding of animals for harmful characteristics. One problem however is that the scientific data to prove the harmful effects of such characteristics are often lacking. In 2018, an ‘experts’ statement’ was published on the breeding of ‘designer cats’, such as (often hairless) Bambino Sphynx. This statement has enabled the de Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) to strengthen its inspection of breeding practices for such cats. Moreover, in 2019 criteria were formulated for Section 3.4 laying down minimum snout lengths for dogs that can be used for breeding.

## Owners

Practically all experts agree that primary responsibility for the welfare of companion animals rests with their owners. This view is reflected in existing legislation, which also explicitly states that the owner of an animal must have sufficient basic knowledge and skills to be able to look after it<sup>34</sup>. There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of owners of companion animals have good intentions. In practice however they do sometimes lack knowledge. Many owners who interact with their animals in ways qualified as harmful in the previous section are not even aware that they are not treating their animals well.

According to many, the best instrument to combat practices in which animals suffer from the love that humans feel for them is effective information. 'Tell the owners they're not doing an animal a favour by dressing it up or giving it a share of the cake!', several experts say. Some pointed out that there is now a wealth of high-quality and reliable information, for example on the website of the Dutch Pet information Centre (LICG), which attracts a million unique visitors every year. The LICG also publishes information leaflets for many animal species, which can be disseminated via pet shops<sup>35</sup>. Approximately half of all Dutch households keep one or more animals in the house, and approximately half of those animals were purchased in a pet shop, so pet shops remain an important channel of information. However, the animal species that are most likely to provoke 'blind love' in humans – and for which information about their species-specific needs is most urgent – namely dogs, cats and horses, are rarely purchased in a pet shop. In 2019, only a third of people who bought an animal had previously sought information on how to look after it. Less than one third felt sufficiently informed about the time investment required, and a mere 15% had a realistic view of the costs of

care (including veterinary care). There is also a group of buyers who deliberately avoid information, on the assumption that in practice they will find out 'automatically' what their animal needs, or who believe that 'previous experiences with animals' (albeit of a completely different species, sometimes) have sufficiently equipped them to keep this new animal.

So we should not expect too much of information: not only because reliable leaflets are not always read, and because there is a great deal of incorrect information (alongside correct information) on the Internet about the behaviour and needs of companion animals, but also, and in particular, because information is often ineffective. Especially so, unfortunately, among the very owners who need that information to change the way they treat their animals. Indeed, they sometimes deliberately avoid information. These owners are probably so attached to their existing interaction with the animal that any corrective information simply fails to break through the psychological barriers they have erected to keep it out.

This is a serious communication problem which cannot easily be solved. Any attempt to admonish such owners is bound to fail, according to animal rights activist Bernard Unti: 'There is no point in repeating the same message in increasing tones of urgency. If the message doesn't come across, there must be an obstacle somewhere. So what you should do is locate that obstacle.' What is more effective is to make animal owners aware of the good practices they might follow<sup>36</sup>. Unti also offers another alternative: 'Calling owners to account by exploiting the unequalled ability of humans to empathise with other animals. This ability means that humans have an extra responsibility. Sometimes this argument works.' While acknowledging these cognitive abilities in humans, psychologist Roos Vonk does not

<sup>34</sup> See Section 1.7 of the Animal Husbandry Decree (*Besluit Houders van Dieren*) (2014), which is part of the Animals Act (*Wet dieren*) (2013).

<sup>35</sup> Pursuant to Section 3.17 of the Animal Husbandry Decree, commercial sellers are obliged to provide their customers with written information on how to care for the purchased animal.

<sup>36</sup> For example, see also the *Weten is nog geen doen* (*Knowledge is not enough to ensure action*) report published by the Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2017.



Photo: Pixabay

expect this to be truly effective for owners who mistreat their animals out of love. 'These owners' personal emotional bond with their pets is so strong that it leaves them no room to really adopt the animal's perspective.'

Whatever the case may be, it seems naive to expect that high-quality information would put an end to all the animal suffering caused by the human need for intimate contact. Ironically, the force of that human need is often too strong for that to happen.

### **Breeders**

Many breeders feel love for the breed they work with. So how is it possible that some breeders breed animals that are bound to suffer from their physical characteristics? 'Some breeders and owners of purebred animals are blind to the health problems typical of their breed,' says pet genetics expert Hille Fieten. She has observed that in practice, breeders tend to play down the welfare issues associated with specific breeds<sup>37</sup>. For many

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<sup>37</sup> Two articles that examine the underlying motives for this: 'Great expectations, inconvenient truths, and the paradoxes of the dog-owner relationship for owners of brachycephalic dogs', (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31323057/>) and 'Why do people buy dogs with potential welfare problems related to extreme conformation and inherited disease? A representative study of Danish owners of four small dog breeds', <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0172091>



breeders, 'cute' external features and a friendly and cheerful character carry more weight in selection practices than health and welfare problems.

According to Ed Gubbels, a great deal of misery results from exhibition practices for purebred animals, which he does not hesitate to refer to as a form of 'organised animal abuse'. Originally, these exhibitions were events where breeders could show their animals and find breeding animals for their next generation. However, according to Gubbels they have since degenerated into 'competitions between humans using animals as objects', with breeders competing 'on the basis of caricatural descriptions in the standards for the breed concerned'. The negative effect of exhibitions, says Gubbels, is twofold. Not only are the winners the animals with the most exaggerated breed features (which often actually hinder them), but the selection of these 'champions' results in extreme in-breeding with all the attendant consequences for the animal's welfare. Gubbels calls for a statutory ban on these 'competitions between humans', although he agrees exhibitions should continue to be permitted for the purpose of healthy breeding practices.

Incidentally, Dutch breeding practices for companion animals compare favourably with those of many breeders abroad. It is precisely because of the usually careful treatment by Dutch breeders of their animals that they are unable to keep up with the current huge demand for puppies. As a result, an unknown number of buyers succumb to the temptation of ordering a puppy via channels other than certified breeders.

### **Veterinarians**

In addition to the sellers of animals, veterinarians also have a responsibility to call owners to account who treat their animals in ways that harm their welfare. For example, if an animal is

badly overweight, the vet should talk to its owner. A vet is also the best person to draw the owner's attention to the importance of specific vaccinations, and to tell owners they had better choose a different breed next time if they want to avoid the permanent health problems of their current pure-bred animal. There is also the task of explaining that a suffering animal will not get better anymore and should perhaps be released from its misery. It certainly helps when the vet suggests it would not be immoral for an owner to decide *against* yet another treatment.

The majority of vets are committed to reducing demand for burdensome care for companion animals, even if their owners are not yet ready to say farewell to them. At the same time, the treatment options are increasing. Majori Meijer of the Amsterdam Animal Shelter thinks 'their' vets do not go too far in treating animals, but she does sometimes frown upon the actions of other vets. She remembers cases of dogs with cancer that were submitted to endless radiation therapies. Meijer: 'I would never do that to my dog, but clearly some vets are willing to meet that demand.'

Quite a few vets now have specialist equipment allowing them to provide chemotherapy, for instance<sup>38</sup>. Veterinarian oncologist Erik Teske points out that, in contrast to practice in human medicine, veterinarians are permitted to perform specialist medical treatments even if they are not specialists in those treatments themselves. As a result, it is not clear how skilled vets actually are in particular specialist treatments.

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<sup>38</sup> An estimated sixty to one hundred Dutch vets perform chemotherapy. The picture is not clear, there is little supervision and special chemotherapy training is not compulsory.

### **Government authorities**

Even though we found that information about (caring for) companion animals does not always reach all owners, it remains important for the government to make sure the information is available and to refer owners to it. Around 30% of potential owners make sure to obtain relevant information before purchasing a pet<sup>39</sup>, and it makes sense help them do so, for example by means of leaflets and official websites, and through forums, platforms, associations and communities with links to animal welfare issues. In *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands* this is formulated as follows: ‘Use innovative indirect forms of communication (online or otherwise)’ to stimulate ‘balanced choices’ regarding a particular companion animal<sup>40</sup>. The government could also consider running a targeted information campaign on the (considerable and often underestimated) costs of keeping pets. TV commercials emphasising that ‘keeping animals costs money’ could encourage potential owners of limited means to change their minds. We should not forget, however, that by producing such commercials the government would seem to ignore the basic inequality between those who can and those who cannot afford the love of a pet.

In addition, it is one of the government’s tasks to enforce compliance with the law, and the law prohibits cruelty to animals. In the past, the term ‘animal abuse’ was mainly held to denote ‘active’, often deliberate mistreatment of animals, and it remains important to fight this type of abuse. However, it is now high time for the government to become sensitive to the issue of animals suffering through the love of (and incorrect treatment by) their owners. Build expertise, gather data on the trends identified above, consider amending rules and regulations, and nudge people into accepting desirable

forms of treating animals (and pets) as self-evident. After all, while it obviously remains necessary to call to account or even prosecute and punish owners who maltreat their animals out of love, it is probably more effective to invite professionals (breeders, vets, animal traders, animal feed companies) to help find solutions to this problem. The government could remind unwilling individual professionals of their responsibilities and, if necessary, take regulatory action or enforce compliance through codes of behaviour.

In *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*, the RDA already called for a ‘shift in policy emphasis’ towards potential contributions from behavioural and communication scientists in order to address this issue<sup>41</sup>. The use of ‘influencers’ may be effective particularly in persuading highly emotionally driven owners to change the way they treat their animals. And virtual reality might help owners become aware of the situation from the perspective of their animal; this approach is still in its pioneering stage. Other experts could perhaps identify the psychological needs of owners that drive the stifling love for their companion animal. While we have deliberately kept this theme beyond the scope of this essay, as pointed out above, it is nevertheless highly relevant to our ability to assess which types of information and measures will work with which groups of people. It would also be interesting to find out whether people’s expectations and desires regarding pets have changed over the past decades, and if so which factors have played a role.

The experts we have consulted explicitly mentioned the following measures: make it harder for people to buy an animal via Marktplaats (an online marketplace) and Facebook groups, and consider tightening regulations for importing dogs.

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<sup>39</sup> *Dibevo - Dibevo*

<sup>40</sup> *op.cit.* p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> *op.cit.* p. 83.

Animal shelters are filled to capacity, due in part to ‘impulsive purchases’ of (sometimes poorly socialised) companion animals that turn out to be ‘unsuitable’ for the family. In practice, this mostly concerns fighting dogs. Also tighten requirements regarding animals that may and those that may not be used for breeding, and prohibit beauty competitions with (pedigree) companion animals. Another measure that is frequently mentioned is a compulsory training course for potential owners before purchasing the animal. And especially: supervise compliance with existing legislation. In other words, step up enforcement.

## 5. Trends

At this point we would like to slightly broaden the focus of this essay. We will do so by briefly exploring several potential consequences for society if the trend towards anthropomorphism in our interaction with animals continues. Our aim is to alert policymakers to the issues they would be facing in such a situation.

### *The debate on anthropomorphism is easily politicised*

Half a century ago, anthropomorphism was thought of as ‘an illusion that arises like a blister in soft human minds: untrained, undisciplined, unhardened’, according to biologist Melvin Sheldrake<sup>42</sup>. There is an element of truth in that: after all, if we humanise the world, we will not be able to understand the lives of other organisms the way they experience their lives themselves. Conversely, a cold and distant attitude to animals may prevent us from becoming aware of important experiences of animals. This would be just as harmful to our view of reality. So what we need to do is improve our understanding of the differences and similarities between humans and animals of all sorts of species.

One thing is clear: accusing animal lovers of anthropomorphism and thinking that this will put an end to the matter scientifically is a strategy that has run its course. Anthropomorphism is here to stay. Indeed, our sensitivity towards the animals we now share our homes with is likely to spread to other animal species. For example, due to anthropomorphism the group of people who object to the way animals are kept in intensive livestock farming will grow. These people ask themselves a simple question: ‘Are these animals suffering?’, and their answer is: ‘Yes, they are’. It may sometimes be the case that this answer is the fruit of empathy rather than factual knowledge. Even so, often there are rational arguments and scientific data to corroborate this primary reaction. Note, moreover, that how it is corroborated hardly affects the societal relevance of this reaction: a growing group of people simply cannot and do not want to ignore the pity they feel for animals. Following this line of reasoning, there is little doubt that it will become even more problematic to secure social acceptance for animal testing, that moral objections will be raised against the use of poison in pest control, and that hunters will continue to face opposition.

Few members of this empathetic group will be persuaded by information campaigns staged by public authorities and interest groups to stress that existing practices are ‘reasonable’ or ‘inevitable’. Strong emotions are not easily subdued by figures and rational analysis. And precisely because the emotions are so strong, some people will even radicalise, claiming that the suffering inflicted on animals warrants violations of the law if that is necessary to ‘save’ them. As a result, groups with extremely different views on the proper relationship between humans and animals will find themselves at loggerheads with each other. In the terminology of this essay, these parties accuse each other of too little or too much anthropomorphism with respect to animals. The risk is that this contrast will reinforce

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<sup>42</sup> Melvin Sheldrake, *Verweven leven: de verborgen wereld van schimmels (Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds)*, Atlas Contact, 2020, p. 53.

existing dividing lines, for instance between urban and rural areas<sup>43</sup>.

### ***The moral debate about companion animals and the moral debate about people will converge***

Since more and more people no longer feel there is a strict borderline between themselves and their animal or pet, it seems likely that the ethical debate on the proper treatment of animals close to us will become increasingly similar to the ethical debate on how we humans should deal with each other. Indeed, we can already see the debate about all sorts of contentious education issues beginning to extend to companion animals. Is it right to criticise a friend for the way he or she treats a dog? How to start a discussion with a neighbour whose cat steals into your house through the cat flap and terrorises your own cat? As a cat owner, do you accept responsibility for damage to a public good, such as the songbird population, that is damaged by your pet? When you see an obese dog, do you call the owner to account? Would you accuse dog owners of threatening the health of your own dog by not vaccinating theirs? To what extent is it permissible for fellow citizens (or the State) to enter a sphere as intimate and so closely connected to personal views on a good and valuable life, as your interaction with your beloved animal? And what authoritative information could you invoke in this regard?

In the past, this way of communicating about animals (i.e. using concepts normally reserved for children or fellow citizens) was unthinkable. We should expect the ethical debate on proper interhuman relationships to further ‘contaminate’

the debate on proper interaction between humans and animals. However, this influence may also work in the opposite direction. One intriguing example is euthanasia. The practice of euthanasia in animals is far less controversial, and much older, than euthanasia in humans<sup>44</sup>. Euthanasia is fairly widely regarded as a blessing for the animal concerned, to the extent that devoted ‘egocentric’ owners may be criticised for not allowing their animals to die a humane death. When an animal is suffering, continuing the treatment without any prospect of improvement is widely felt not to be in the animal’s interest. Would it not be right to extend this line of reasoning to human patients, rather than trying to prolong their lives as long as possible?<sup>45</sup> Such comparisons between practices for animals and for humans put the ethical debate on edge, which helps to clarify the moral issues at stake. And this, in turn, may reveal that actually we do need to differentiate between humans and animals. Unlike humans, for instance, animals probably have no notion of a future, and no awareness, therefore, of what they will miss. And we cannot ask the animal itself whether it feels its life is still worth living. This is why euthanasia in animals is fundamentally different from euthanasia in humans. This is the type of morally relevant information that emerges when practices with respect to animals are compared to those with respect to humans.

### ***Pressing issues in human care systems will also emerge in veterinary healthcare systems***

Demand for care is essentially insatiable, which is why the healthcare ‘market’ is different from normal markets<sup>46</sup>. Medical professionals will always look for better therapies, and most

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<sup>43</sup> The consulted American experts Serpell and Grimm explicitly mention this gap between urban and rural attitudes towards animals. Incidentally, the RDA’s survey did not unequivocally confirm that city dwellers in the Netherlands are more empathetic towards animals than the rural population. The most important indicator for more empathy with animals is the extent to which the respondents themselves are in contact with leisure animals. *The State of the Animal in the Netherlands*, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Staffleu, F.R. (2016). *Even a cow could be killed...: about the difference between killing (some) animals and (some) humans*. In Franck Meijboom & Elsbeth Stassen (Eds.), *The end of animal life: a start for ethical debate: a start for ethical debate - ethical and societal considerations on killing animals* (pp. 103-114) (110 p.). Wageningen Academic Publishers.

<sup>45</sup> An observation made by Dirk-Jan Verdonk during the RDA’s discussion with him. Note that Verdonk only intended to point out that it would be logical for this question to be asked, without adopting any normative position himself.

<sup>46</sup> For example, see: Annemarie Mol, ‘Klant of zieke? Markttaal en de eigenheid van de gezondheidszorg’, *Krisis*, 2004 (3).



patients will be eager to accept treatment that offers them hope that their suffering can be relieved or their lives prolonged. While these dynamics are understandable, they do result in an almost uncontrolled increase of healthcare costs and would mean financial ruin for individuals who need care. To control that risk, all Dutch citizens are subject to compulsory basic healthcare insurance, with experts deciding what is covered and what is not. And to curb the urge among doctors to provide treatment and among patients to demand it, healthcare insurers have been placed in charge of collective healthcare budgets. Without this critical role for insurers – in other words, if care decisions were purely a matter for the patient and the doctor to discuss – healthcare costs would rise too sharply.

Of course, there are crucial differences between human medicine and veterinary medicine. Vets are currently trying to reduce the demand for care because there are simply not enough of them to meet that demand<sup>47</sup>. Rising costs of veterinary healthcare are currently regarded as a problem for private individuals rather than for society as a whole, as reflected in the fact that we are not required by law to take out medical insurance for animals entrusted to our care. So the trend we are exploring here is still a very long way off. Even so, the more the owners feel their animal is part of the family, the more likely they are to seek as much care for it as possible when it is ill – just like they would do for other members of the family. As long as veterinary healthcare insurance is not mandatory, this trend will lead to arbitrariness: animals in poor households will receive less care than those in rich households. Some people will feel that this is unjust; sooner or later, they can be expected to call for compulsory veterinary care insurance. This will then probably

give rise to the same dynamics as in human health care. In other words: it will prove to be just as difficult to prevent total veterinary health-care costs from spiralling out of control as it is for the costs of human health care. In response to that, we are likely to see a call for market supervisors, such as an animal health council which concerns itself with the types of care to be covered, and prudent insurers that serve as gatekeepers for insured veterinary health care. This can be expected to be accompanied by endless debates much like those surrounding current processes in human health care.

### *The interests of companion animals will play an increasingly prominent role in the law*

The legal status of animals has always been volatile, and has rarely – if ever – been unambiguous. In the late Middle Ages, in our part of the world animals were sometimes summoned to court to account for their behaviour. On such occasions they were treated as subjects and were also, accordingly, assigned a lawyer who sometimes revelled in hair-splitting legal arguments<sup>48</sup>. In contrast, from the Age of Enlightenment onwards, animals tended to be reduced to biological ‘machines’. They were deemed not to have a consciousness that could register any sensations such as pain and, as such, were in fact incapable of suffering. Accordingly, from a legal perspective animals were treated as ‘things’. When animals used for work or production were maltreated, the owner only needed to be compensated for any loss of economic value, and all other animals were beyond legal protection anyway. The first legislation against animal abuse appeared in the nineteenth century. Initially, the main purpose of this legislation was not to protect the animals themselves but rather to prevent people

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<sup>47</sup> While there are no figures to confirm this lack of vets, it is reflected in reports from the profession about the numerous vacancies for vets that are proving hard to fill.

<sup>48</sup> One famous defender of animals was Bartholomé Chassenée. In 1508, Chassenée defended the rats that had been feeding off a corn field in Autun. For a start, he summoned all the rats in the diocese as witnesses, causing considerable delay in the proceedings. When the rats failed to appear in court, Chassenée claimed that this could not be held against them as the countless dogs and cats on the roads made the journey the courthouse too dangerous for them. For an accessible article about animals being summoned to court, see: <https://www.nationalgeographic.nl/geschiedenis-en-cultuur/2020/06/dieren-voor-het-gerecht-een-serieuze-zaak>. Interestingly, animals ‘near’ to humans, such as dogs, pigs and cows, tended to be tried individually, whereas other animals (such as the rats in the above example) were summoned to account for the behaviour of their species. If found guilty, individual animals could be hanged or sentenced to other types of punishment, while a whole species was often anathematised.

from witnessing animal abuse, as it was felt to undermine human morality<sup>49</sup>.

Since 1981, recognition of an animal's 'intrinsic value' (i.e., its value separate from the animal's significance for humans) has served as the guiding principle for government policy. Even today, however, the notion of animals as creatures with 'legal capacity' meets with opposition, on the assumption, for example, that animals cannot have legal capacity because they are unable to assert their rights and to assume 'obligations'. These counterarguments have not put an end to the debate. Some thinkers and activists have responded that it is high time, evidently, to explicitly grant rights also to non-human co-citizens<sup>50</sup>, while others claim that we will have to train ourselves in regarding non-human creatures as citizens<sup>51</sup>.

Since 2013, animals no longer qualify as 'things' under Dutch law<sup>52</sup>. The legal significance of this has not yet fully crystallised, with several different practices still being applied simultaneously, causing some friction. Now that animals are no longer regarded as 'ordinary things' by definition, in divorce cases an animal no longer necessarily goes to the partner who originally bought it. A judge may be inclined to also consider the interests of the dog or cat concerned. Perhaps the dog will go to live with the ex-partner to whom it is most attached, or with the person who has the most time to take care of it, or perhaps there will be a visitation arrangement. Similarly, animals whose owner has died without clearly appointing an heir will not (and cannot) be treated primarily as 'things'. And in insurance cases, it is possible that in future the court will no longer simply weigh up the expected veterinary costs against the purely rational 'current value' of the

animal concerned. From a private law perspective, animals are goods that can be owned as property. In principle, therefore, the owner is responsible for the animal that it keeps, which responsibility includes taking care of it. This also means, with regard to the animals we keep, that it is clear who is responsible for them and for taking care of them. Companion animals are part of a deceased person's estate and will go to the principal heir, but it is possible to provide for the animal in a special legacy in the will. So the status of animals in the law and in the justice system is currently somewhat ambiguous. More clarity will (have to) be provided on this matter in the future.

This expected effort to streamline the legal status of animals will probably also have consequences for professionals who work with animals. The American science journalist David Grimm mentions the example of veterinary surgeons. While the changing status of animals can bring (financial) benefits for vets, it can also work against them, says Grimm. 'It is conceivable that some vets will place moral pressure on an owner, "Your cat really ought to have this operation immediately, the poor animal is suffering." The owner could then feel obliged to spend a thousand dollars on gallstone surgery for a cat he bought at the animal shelter for fifty dollars. If the cat then were to die during the operation, the owner could sue the vet for negligence and claim forty thousand euros or so in damages for emotional stress. For a cat that cost fifty dollars.' While Grimm argues from within a US context, which is known for its extremely fierce legal battles, it is certainly not inconceivable that a similar debate would develop in the Netherlands. Unless the legislator pre-empts this battle by clarifying the legal status of animals. After all, under current Dutch law animals are a very peculiar kind of 'thing'.

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<sup>49</sup> Dirk-Jan Verdonk, *Dierenrechten*, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, p. 127. This basic principle was applied quite consistently: when committed out of sight, animal abuse was felt to be a less serious offence.

<sup>50</sup> For a clear account of the debate, see Dirk-Jan Verdonk, *Dierenrechten*, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, and in particular his discussion of post-humanist views of animal rights on pp. 74 ff. According to post-humanist philosophy there is no reason to assign moral significance to boundaries between species.

<sup>51</sup> The French philosopher Bruno Latour is a leading voice in this debate; see *The Parliament of Things: on Gaia and the representation of non-humans* (Uitgeverij Boom, 2020). In a variety of – often theatrical – ways, followers of Latour try to give a voice not just to animals, but also to rivers and landscapes, in political decision-making.

<sup>52</sup> Pursuant to Section 3:22a of the Dutch Civil Code.

## 6. In conclusion: striking the right balance

Experts have the strong impression that anthropomorphism is on the rise. More people than ever before are inclined to assign characteristics and abilities to animals that were previously reserved for humans. These include the perception of pain, love, fear, joy, boredom and friendship, as well as problem-solving abilities. At the beginning of this essay, we stated that animals have most to gain from the sense of kinship that people increasingly feel with animals, because it usually also inspires them to ensure better treatment for their animals.

This change in mentality is enormous. Half a century ago, this feeling of kinship was regarded as ‘an illusion that arises like a blister in soft human minds: untrained, undisciplined, unhardened’, according to biologist Melvin Sheldrake<sup>53</sup>. Today, however, there does not appear to be any scientific argument to be so scornful of anthropomorphism, although it is not entirely without risks either. We can also humanise animals *too much*. If we do, we fail to understand the lives of other organisms the way they experience their lives themselves – with the risk of harming them unwittingly. Previously, however, due to our unduly cold and distant attitude to animals we ignored or failed to register important experiences of animals. And that is just as harmful – a fact that people who feel strong empathy for animals are trying to call attention to. So we need to strike the right balance or, put differently, find the right degree of anthropomorphism.

The RDA would welcome further ideas and discussion as to what ‘appropriate’ anthropomorphism could mean in practice. What is a proper type of bond between humans and animals? How can we allow love between humans and animals to exist without the animal being completely annexed in our human environment?<sup>54</sup> What space is there to acknowledge and even

celebrate the fact that animals are also *different* from humans, and how could animals benefit from that notion in practice?

The RDA will continue to reflect on these and similar questions, calls for a social debate on this theme and looks forward to contributing its own thoughts and views.

### **Experts consulted**

General:

- Gregory Berns, neuroscientist, neuroeconomist, professor and writer. Research into dogs in an MRI so as to uncover their thoughts.
- David Grimm, journalist with Science magazine and author of *Citizen Canine: Our Evolving Relationship with Cats and Dogs*.
- Bas Haring, professor of Public Understanding of Science at Leiden University, member of the Council for Animal Affairs.
- James Serpell, professor of Animal Ethics and Welfare at the University of Pennsylvania.
- Bernard Unti, historian, senior policy advisor at The Humane Society of the United States, Washington.
- Dirk-Jan Verdonk, art historian and director of World Animal Protection.
- Roos Vonk, social psychologist at Radboud University Nijmegen (and animal rights activist).

### **Behaviour and welfare:**

- Joanne van der Borg, behavioural biologist specialising in dog behaviour, owner of DogVision, works at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine’s Department of Animals in Science and Society, Utrecht University.
- Machteld van Dierendonck, clinical ethologist and independent researcher, specialising in horses.

<sup>53</sup> Melvin Sheldrake, *Verweven leven: de verborgen wereld van schimmels (Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds)*, Atlas Contact, 2020, p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see the inaugural lecture by Saskia S. Arndt, *Animal Perspectives: hoe het bestuderen van diergedrag ons kan helpen het perspectief van het dier te begrijpen en het dier perspectief te bieden*, Utrecht University, 2018.

- Godelieve Kranendonk, behavioural biologist & manager of the Behavioural and Veterinary Specialists Team at AAP, Rescue Centre for Exotic Animals.
- Claudia Vinke, behavioural biologist, lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine's Department of Animals in Science and Society, Utrecht University. Works at the Animal Behaviour Clinic.
- Michel van der Plas and Loraine Klemens, World of Birds Foundation.

#### **Medical care:**

- Josje ten Kate, sociologist and PhD student in human vaccination behaviour.
- Majori Meijer, cynological behavioural therapist, Amsterdam Animal Shelter (DOA).
- Peter Mijten, Business Unit Director at Companion Animal & Equine-Benelux, Zoetis.
- Marjolein Schröder, team leader of the dogs section at DOA.
- Erik Teske (Oncology, RUU department of Veterinary Medicine), professor of Oncology in Companion Animals and Horses at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine in Liège,

associate professor of Oncology at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University.

#### **Breeding:**

- Hille Fieten, coordinator at the Expertise Centre of Genetics at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University.
- Walter Getreuer, reptile expert, owner of RetielenZoo Serpo.
- Ed Gubbels, Population Geneticist at Genetic Counselling Services.

#### **Feed**

- Ronald Corbee, specialist in Clinical Nutrition of Companion Animals, Faculty of Veterinary Science.
- Job Stumpel, veterinary surgeon and biologist specialising in reptiles and amphibians. Veterinary surgeon of Wildlands Adventure Zoo, Emmen.
- Yvonne van Zeeland, accredited European Veterinary Specialist in Avian Medicine and Surgery, works as a veterinary surgeon-specialist at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine's Department of Birds and Special Animals, Utrecht University.



Photo: Pixabay

# Annex

The forum members are Dr N. (Nienke) Endenburg, D. (David) van Gennep MSC, H.R. (Renée) Chalmers Hoyneck van Papendrecht MSC, G. (Gerrit) Hofstra MSC, C.W. (Léon) Ripmeester LLM, M. (Marjan) Slob MSC (author) and

R.A. (Ruud) Tombrock MSC (chair). Prof. S.S. (Saskia) Arndt was added to the forum as external expert on animal behaviour. M.H.W. (Marc) Schakenraad MSc and D. (Daniëlle) Hartman MSc provided support services from within the RDA office.

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