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## **Everyday ethics of animal death: a proposal for a research agenda. Mapping the research field in Central Europe and the Nordics.**

### **Abstract**

In this article we attempt to map the so-far poorly explored and researched field of the ethics of animal death in specific regional contexts. We propose a mixed-methods sociological exploration of the ideas on and attitudes towards animal death in settings where the death of an animal is subject to human decision. The sociology-of-knowledge approach complemented by survey research is used to tease out the current communicative negotiation of what passes for common sense knowledge on the ethics of animal killing and euthanasia. We are inspired by the huge, so far unexplained, differences in understanding the ethics of animal death in various European countries. We delve into these questions contrastively in a regional Central and Eastern European setting and propose a way of illuminating the dynamics of formation of ethical concepts relating to animal

death and euthanasia among the wider public. We specifically concentrate on social media audiences composed of pet owners and secondary school students. Finland and Poland are used as examples of complicated processes of constructing concepts of a presupposed “ethicality” of certain modes of animal killing and euthanasia.

**Key words:** everyday ethics, animal death, animal euthanasia, sociology of knowledge

**Note on terminology**

*For the sake of shortness, the article uses the term “animals” to designate animal creatures other than Homo sapiens, instead of the now commonly used “non-human animals”. Animal killing refers to the slaughtering of animals for food, killing individuals that cannot be put to agricultural use on farms (e.g. bull calves, rooster chicks etc.) and killing animals by breeders in the context of breeding plans (e.g. culling); animal euthanasia refers to killing pet animals in experimental and veterinary clinical settings, or deliberate “merciful killing” of animals performed by other persons (owners, helpers etc.).*

**Introduction**

When reading popular and specialized press tackling the subject of animal death and pet euthanasia, one observes significant differences in attitudes displayed by media audiences and social media users. Debates on pet euthanasia entered into by animal owners on various social media handles are especially revealing in this regard. Whereas most of the debates concentrate on the need to quickly relieve the suffering of pets - often through euthanasia - in countries like Finland, Polish pet owners’ discussions prominently feature various complicated and prolonged therapies, underscoring the human wish to keep the animal alive as long as possible.

Similar tendencies are observable when studying various book publications on the subject, often written as 'guidebooks' intended to help grieving owners cope with their animal's passing.

We contend that such marked differences in attitudes towards animal death and pet euthanasia in otherwise relatively similar cultural contexts merit deeper scholarly attention, especially due to the rising popularity of the general topic of euthanasia, also concerning humans, in the wider public field. Exploring the moral reasoning of various actors with regard to animal euthanasia has the potential to further illuminate the shifting public perceptions of human euthanasia. To our knowledge, studies considering the suggested interconnection of the two topics have not been conducted so far, and even research considering both issues simultaneously tended to hold them apart (Kure, 2011).

Moreover, there is a lacuna of studies on the actual definition of animal euthanasia (Lorenzini, 2020). Those that have been done concentrate on the reasoning of animal rights activists (Regan, 1983), or stem from countries in which human euthanasia is legal (Meijer, 2018), thus influencing the conceptualizations of animal euthanasia and killing in potentially confounding ways. We propose to explore the issue of public discourses on animal euthanasia in countries where human euthanasia is not permitted, taking Finland and Poland as examples for a comparative study. The signaled significant differences between them provide ample material for studying ways in which ethical knowledge and concepts are elaborated by the public with the help of expert discourses, personal exchanges, and social media activity.

### **Research background and the need for a new approach**

The 20th and 21st century have been marked by fundamental changes in human attitudes towards animal life. It has been argued repeatedly that a society's attitude towards animals constitutes a measure of its

‘humaneness’ and progress (Wierzbicki, 1992; Krauthammer, 2015). This assertion is now so widespread in the media that it has entered the realm of ‘common knowledge’, repeated in countless popular and professional publications on animal and environmental protection, ethics of animal experimentation, diets, farming, food consumption etc. This view is commonly ascribed even to Mahatma Gandhi, although the veracity of the attribution is debated (Singer, 2011; Johnson, 2013).

The relevance of the above listed issues is even more evident nowadays as the global push towards various facets of ‘sustainability’ gains momentum and dominates both the scientific discourse, the public sphere and the media. The sustainability-centered approaches towards a wiser use of the Earth’s limited resources often call for a reinterpretation of the human concern with and responsibility towards animals as fellow inhabitants of the planet. Implemented in the fields of ethics, environmental and agricultural sciences, veterinary medicine etc., they pose serious questions and raise concerns about the power relations implicated in the human use of animals as resources, food sources, companions, pets.

Nowadays, the radical animal rights approaches based largely in utilitarian concerns about animals’ ability to experience pain and suffering dismiss the traditional Biblical ‘dominion over animals’ (Genesis 1:26) as violence (Nash, 1984; Singer, 1975); they also consider its later Christian additions on compassion and the need of human care for the whole creation (York, Alexis-Baker, 2012; Preece, Fraser, 2000) as wholly insufficient. Instead, they advocate for a radical abandonment of animal farming (Singer, in Stamp-Dawkins, Bonney 2008; Reese, 2018), transition to plant-based or even biotechnologically engineered diets (Harari, 2015; Pluhar, 2010), a ban on animal/pet ownership on ethical or public health grounds (Jackson, 2005; PETA; Rodriguez, McRobbie 2017; Francione, Charlton 2015) and a ban on religious ritual killing (Zuolo, 2015; Rovinsky, 2014). Paradoxically,

the various radical animal rights approaches and their mainstream interpretations often themselves include strong ethical paradoxes, as is the case with the advocacy for insect farming and insect-based diets notwithstanding a general lack of scientific research on insects' ability to suffer when farmed and killed (Pali-Schöll et al., 2019; Foreman, 2022). They also often collide with the bedrock values and the wider political order of Western democracies, such as individual freedom and freedom of religion, e.g., when postulating all-encompassing bans on certain agricultural production technologies, foods, *kosher* and *halal* slaughter and social practices such as pet keeping. Some approaches reject even the possibility of euthanasia for suffering and sick animals (Hurn, 2018).

The gravity and seriousness of the ethical questions centered around the human use and handling of animals is most succinctly encapsulated in the issue of animal death and animal killing. Slaughter for food in agricultural contexts, religious slaughter for food, pet euthanasia to 'diminish suffering', killing of litter 'runts' by pet breeders (culling) – all exemplify practices which involve active decision making to execute an operation of taking an animal's life. We propose to approach these practices as elements of a wider social universe of meaning, in the tradition of the new sociology of knowledge (Berger, Luckman, 1966; Babich, 2017).

### **The case for a sociology-of knowledge approach to animal death**

The new sociology of knowledge has not yet been extensively used in the study of anthrozoology, notwithstanding the fact that it is anchored in the symbolic interactionist tradition, which has so far produced important insights into the human-animal relationship (Sanders, 1991; Irvine, 2004; Konecki, 2005). In the following, a case for a sociology-of-knowledge approach to the ethics of animal death is briefly presented.

Decisions on taking an animal's life are historically predicated on the ethical norms and narratives of a given society, and can incorporate a

multitude of elements, i.e., philosophical traditions, ethical theorizing, dominant societal/religious narratives and socio-cognitive devices used to judge the proper ethics and execution of animal death, individual motivations etc. However, despite their great diversity, they are generally, with the exception of industrialized agricultural slaughter, all individual decisions that need to be executed quickly. As such, they are informed by generalized, socially shared beliefs – stocks of knowledge - about the value of animal life. Without the possibility to momentarily make use of the common societal stocks of knowledge on, for example, the need to diminish pet suffering through euthanasia, many decisions concerning animal death would be impossible to execute in empirical contexts due to their great moral and ethical complexity.

Therefore, the ethical reasoning involved in them can be understood as an element of a wider ‘common knowledge’ on the human-animal relationship, embedded in a particular historical and societal context. This conceptualization of ethical reasoning, combined with the instantaneous, material and embodied nature of human decisions on taking an animal’s life that also involve emotions and other bodily responses, moves it into the realm of sociological examination. It also creates the need to find concepts capable of capturing the interplay between abstract ethical reasoning and concrete emotional and bodily responses that influence the human understanding of animal death.

The new sociology of knowledge (Berger, Luckmann 1966; Knoblauch, 2011) and its specific tools for the examination of discourses (Keller, 2005; Keller, 2012) provide the researcher with an approach capable of capturing both the abstract and the emotional dimensions of the ethical dilemma involved in animal death. This is accomplished through examining the animal death as part of the human ‘life world’ (Knoblauch, 2011, s. 132), understood as an element of a wider ethical and social order, composed of

various meaning-making practices typical for the particular social and historical context. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966, s. 65), the social knowledge generated by this wider context is "the sum total of 'what everybody knows' about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth".

In the case of human decisions on animal death, already a quick look at media-facilitated debates on animal killing for food as well as concrete discussions on pet euthanasia engaged into by animal owners on social media provide us with an array of 'common knowledge' claims, e.g. the popular concept of 'eliminating suffering' through quick euthanasia, the supposed ethicality of killing very old agricultural animals with no observable disease, the belief in the pain-free onset of death in rodents killed in home-made carbon dioxide boxes despite scientific evidence to the contrary (Leach et al., 2002) etc.

The sociology of knowledge approach helps to methodically identify, categorize, and interpret the social knowledge on animal death at the general level exemplified by the issues mentioned above; additionally, it acknowledges the fact that social knowledge always starts with individual subjectivity, where meaning is created and where meaningful human action can occur (Schütz, 1932/1967). That is why attention needs to be paid to processes in which humans form their concepts of animal death through personal experiences of killing, euthanasia, loss, and grief. Our perspective, embedded in the tradition of the new sociology of knowledge, combines the more general, societal level of ethical sense-making related to animal death, with the more mundane, often very intimate experiences that individual people involved in decision making that leads to animal euthanasia form during the process.

A thorough understanding of the particularities of such individual meaning-making and its wider social embeddedness is crucially important in a world of accelerated social change, where discourses and arguments

that challenge and re-evaluate the traditional ways of understanding human-animal relationships reach the central stage in the public square. A sociology-of-knowledge approach, with its tradition of thorough discourse analysis, participant observation and slow forming of hypotheses built on rich data, is well suited to meet the challenge of understanding and unpacking the complicated, often multilayered dynamics that govern changes in our current approaches to both human and animal death and the ways in which we perceive both our animal companions and ourselves as social and ethical beings.

### **Rationale for a comparative regional approach**

Taken more generally, with the sociology-of-knowledge approach we propose to uncover the trajectories of ideas taken for granted as ‘knowledge’ by the actors engaged in debates on the execution of animal death. Whereas the philosophical sources of ideas on the (in)permissibility of animal euthanasia are often known, their wider public careers (Gusfield, 1981) and trajectories of influence, such as their connection with the ethics of human death and concepts like ‘life not worth living’, are not well researched. Moreover, the different trajectories that particular ethical approaches towards animal death actually take in specific national or regional settings are not well understood, especially on the most mundane, everyday level of people’s interactions with animals.

For example, already a brief look at the social media debates on dog or rodent euthanasia in various countries reveals huge differences in the understanding of the need to prevent animal suffering in different societies. For example, whereas pet owners engaged in social media debates in Finland generally advocate for a foregoing of prolonged and possibly painful therapy, a failure to administer comparable therapies in Poland is often understood as nothing short of an active ‘murder’ of the animal.

These examples do not only illustrate huge differences in viewing animal death but also open a possibility to tease out the actual trajectories of ethical reasoning involved in it by comparing the situations in the respective countries ('public careers of problems'). This is especially the case here, as Finland and Poland display a similar institutional organization of animal welfare (Kivelä, Lahtinen, Uotila 2017), possess similar legal animal protection regulations, virtually identical veterinary education schemes on the secondary and academic level, and are exposed, due to globalized media flows, to similar rhetoric concerning 'animal rights', 'animal welfare', 'animal abuse' etc. The fact that institutional and media frameworks do not sufficiently explain the differences in the formation of popular knowledge on animal death points to its deeper anchoring in the social fabric of societies and their respective history. By comparing discourses on animal death dominating in Finland and Poland, we can discern how much of the social knowledge on this (and probably any other) ethical issue is formed by internalization of social norms and narratives that are taken for granted, and how processes of re-interpretation, re-contextualization, contestation work to form localized, country- or group-specific 'knowledges'.

A possible hypothesis that should be tested as to the source of the described differences is the influence of different religious traditions (Lutheranism in Finland, Catholicism in Poland) on the formation of ethical knowledge and views on both human and animal euthanasia. 'Finnish' Lutheranism and 'Polish' Catholicism have radically different institutional presence and backing in each of the two societies and are probably variously influencing the dominant understandings of animal life and death. This hypothesis runs counter to earlier claims that Christianity, and by extension, Christian influence on societies, have largely neglected any ethical consideration of animals (Singer, 1985); it also runs counter to the now widespread post-humanist paradigm in anthrozoology that often postulates a redefinition of traditional religion in order to transcend the human-

animal boundary (Mitek-Dziemba, 2019). These approaches, however, do not do justice to the actual interplay of religious and ethical thinking in concrete situations where decisions to take an animal's life are taken. The popular traditions of blessing animals by the Roman Catholic church, as well as the official position papers of the Lutheran church with respect to animal farming constitute only some examples of the modern connection between Christian religious practice and the animal world.

This being so, it becomes necessary to examine how much the religious stances of the respective churches on human suffering and human dignity translate into popular discourses on animals, where the animal subjects are re-interpreted and anthropomorphized to stand in for the human subjects originally discussed in religious traditions.

The degree to which other moral traditions and intellectual currents circulating within the public space (New Age, eugenics, transhumanism) influence the moral reasoning connected to animal death should also be examined, especially when considering the connections between human and animal death and euthanasia practices. The research path conceptualized in this article is dedicated to a thorough dissection of all possible building blocks of popular knowledge and everyday ethics involved in the evolution of discourses on animal death. Such mode of work is crucial in order to discern the processes underlying the construction of what passes for 'knowledge' on animal ethics and the implications for moral agency that such 'knowledge' produces.

### **How to go about researching discourses on animal death and euthanasia? Previous research**

There could be many points in which to anchor a research project on the attitudes towards and discourses on animal death in a given society. We propose to concentrate on two important groups of actors that are actively

involved in debates on the subject: pet owners engaging in social media activity and young people involved in secondary level veterinary education (studying for the degree of veterinary technician - 'technik weterynarii' in Poland and "eläintenhoitaja" in Finland).

We believe it worth concentrating on those two groups to begin with as their active involvement in the field of animal ethics and animal death/euthanasia is obvious. By choosing these and not other actors, we follow the tradition of anthropological and sociological studies that have frequently examined pet owners and veterinary professionals, especially in research concerned with ethical questions (Rathwell-Deault et al., 2017; Manette, 2004; Sandøe et al., 2015).

There exists an already established body of research dealing with the subject of animal euthanasia in veterinary practice worldwide, as well as specifically in the two countries of our interest (Shugart, 2021; Helios, Jedlecka 2022; Hildebrand, 2020; Kogan, Cooney 2023; Schuurman, 2017). Most of the studies are of practical nature, providing veterinarians and other professionals involved in the care of pets with guidelines on the performance of euthanasia; some work has also been dedicated to the ethical components of professional decisions leading to euthanasia in a veterinary setting (Knesl et al., 2017; Kipperman et al., 2018). Most of these studies, however, concentrate on the 'objective' (health) situation of the animal to be euthanized, providing veterinarians with various criteria on which they can judge the necessity of the procedure, also on ethical grounds, e.g., whether euthanasia is a consequence of a grave and incurable illness or a wish of owners unable to cover the medical costs of their pets' treatment. Only few studies seek to explain in practice how euthanasia decisions are made in the actual context of a veterinary practice (Yeates, 2011). With the approach presented in this article, we attempt to fill this lacuna.

Moreover, the existing studies concentrate on veterinary doctors and students of veterinary medicine (Sandgren et al., 2020) . We propose to

widen this paradigm and concentrate on the perspective of veterinary technicians, including prospective veterinary technicians still involved in their professional education. This avenue is worth pursuing as the work performed by veterinary technicians has so far either been neglected or conceptualized as ‘dirty work’ (Sanders, 2010). It involves intimate dealings with animal cadavers, excrements etc. and has to be emotionally and discursively compensated for by the personnel, not least through the actual ‘quality time’ spent with animal patients. In general, technicians spend longer periods of time with the animals in their care than doctors due to multiple caring and cleaning tasks that the veterinarians themselves do not perform. Due to the ‘dirty’ character of the work, the life world of veterinary technicians has been conceptualized as a space prone to emotional and professional crisis and burn out (Kogan et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2020). To our knowledge, almost no work has been done so far on the formation of ethical concepts in this professional group, not to mention in educational settings preparing actors to pursue this career path.

We believe it is absolutely necessary to fill this lacuna as the field of (professional) education faces serious challenges nowadays. One of such challenges is undoubtedly the task of developing a space for dialogue between representatives of different cultures, religions and worldviews; a space that would make it possible to reconcile respect for differences with the simultaneous recognition of principled values and ethical principles.

Axiological education, centered on ethical questions and values, could undoubtedly provide such a space as it emphasizes the importance of shaping the ethical competences of future veterinary staff in the face of the needs and challenges resulting from civilizational and cultural changes of the present time. It is key to assume that respect and acceptance of cultural diversity does not have to lead to the negation of principled values and objectivity. Pluralism is understood here as a multiplicity of individual

attitudes or theoretical models that describe the complex nature of cultural, ethical, and religious phenomena while retaining the general idea of "unity", which might be interpreted differently by different actors. We follow Hessen's (1931, p. 21) understanding of culture as a "set of values having unconditional validity". This allows us to discern the archetypal intuitions preserved within the axiological order and simultaneously acknowledge that they are expressed differently in different traditions. On this view, one of the primary tasks of education is to cultivate universal ethical values among its participants.

Young people preparing to perform a profession tend to search for a proven and applicable system of values to which they could commit themselves. One of the components of a workable professional ethics helping young professionals adapt to the requirements of modernity is their relation to the spiritual sphere. Supporting active engagement with the culture of the spirit through education and fostering the development of conceptual and reflective thinking in students helps them navigate complex ethical realities. Acknowledging the agency of students and young professionals involved in education is key to our research setup. We understand this agency as guided by ethical values which ultimately stem from the classic, deeply humanist, and humane axiological categories, which is especially the case in caring professions such as veterinary technicians.

We believe it is necessary to pay special attention to processes of internalization of ethical values within the educational context, tracing how students acquire and combine values with norms that are applicable in practice. This component is crucial in reconstructing ethical decision-making processes. A thorough mapping of 'universal' ethical values mentioned above is especially significant for the approach proposed here as such values usually trigger the desire to be useful to others, oppose the consumerist lifestyle, nihilism, and moral chaos. A meaningful and decent life, manifested by full axiological maturity in the cognitive, emotional, and moral

spheres, presumes moral choices that emphasize truth and justice, as well as respect for life and dignity of people and animals alike. We are inspired by Stanisław Kaczor (1997, p. 143) who reflected upon the ethical components of professional education thus:

“Historical research on the development of vocational education sees its origins in the fields related to crafts and craft apprenticeships, strongly emphasizing their ethical components. Such elements of professional education as reliability of products and services, dependability, trustworthiness of the information provided about products and services, were regarded as "natural”.

Due to a multitude of previous studies on pet owners (DeMello, 2016; Morris, 2012; Roeske, 2022; Schuurman, 2016), focusing our inquiry on this group ensures ample material for comparisons and discussion, especially if our own results should differ from previous research. What is more, our approach offers a fresh perspective on the already existing body of pet owner research, which has so far tended to concentrate on the grief and pain connected to animal death/euthanasia (Wrobel, Dye 2003). It examined emotional strategies of dealing with the loss of pets, often through various ethnographic means (DeMello, 2016; Morris, 2012; Roeske, 2022), sometimes quantitative statistical methods (Spitznagel et al. 2020) and theoretical philosophical considerations (Redmalm, 2019). However, most of the mentioned studies bypass a discussion on the concepts and meaning-making processes used by owners to interpret the ethics of pet euthanasia in a broader social universe. The ethical perspective on forming concepts and ‘knowledge’ that guide the complicated decision-making processes which ultimately lead to putting an animal down has so far been taken up only by rare studies which explicitly focused on ethical reasoning (Bussolari et al., 2018). With the approach presented in this article, we attempt to fill this lacuna.

### **The concept of ‘everyday ethics’**

Given the multitude of paradoxes that dominate our contemporary discussions on animal death and the human involvement in it, as well as the destabilization of common societal attitudes towards animal killing through new concepts and theories that reject the long-established approaches to animal welfare, such as modern animal rights (Regan, 1983), speciesism (Ryder, 1994; Dunayer, 2004), animal liberation (Singer, 1975/1977), both scholars and the wider society are faced with a challenge to understand the everyday ethics that govern our contemporary understandings of the human-animal relationship and decisions to end animal lives.

In order to capture the actual dynamics of the formation of ethical knowledge and its usage in decision making, we believe it is worth introducing the concept of ‘everyday ethics’. It points to the social reality in which our ethical reasoning is embedded in a broader structure and distribution of knowledge within society. Ethical reasoning is always rooted in individual subjectivity, but it is also simultaneously influenced by individual animal encounters, interpersonal communication, formed through various interactions with the media, shaped by intellectuals speaking in the media, and regulated through the dominant problematizations of the human-animal relationship in a given historical context. The everyday knowledge utilized to make ethical decisions on animal euthanasia and killing can be understood as a sum of all those interactions, a horizon of shared meanings that actors involved in human-animal relationships establish in interaction with animals and with each other.

‘Everyday ethics’ constitutes one of the building blocks of popular social knowledge formed by humans on the topic of animal death. The concept of everyday ethics refers to momentary decision making in ethically troubled environments and the principles implied by the decisions taken. It has so far been applied mostly in studies on research practice (Guillemin,

Gillam, 2004; Rossman, Rallis, 2010), nursing, medicine and social work (Zizzo et al., 2016; Banks, 2016).

The concept captures well both the theoretical underpinnings of human decisions and reasoning, as well as the direct, embodied and material elements involved in killing. As the killing and euthanasia happen in a life world in which humans interact with each other and with animals, their everyday ethics will be manifested through everyday behavior, but the deeper reasoning behind it and the various ‘knowledges’ underpinning it can be discerned through a sociology-of-knowledge analysis.

### **How to go about researching discourses on animal death and euthanasia? The sociology-of-knowledge approach**

With the help of the concept of ‘everyday ethics’, we are able to approach the life world of animal killing and euthanasia utilizing both the micro- and macro-sociological perspectives. We propose to organize the research process around two main axes: the micro-sociological and communicative and macro-sociological and discursive. Both perspectives should supplement each other in the analysis of materials deemed most promising for a sociology-of-knowledge examination.

By those, we mean on one hand media materials, with special attention paid to the online production and negotiation of knowledge on ethical (in)permissibility of pet euthanasia by pet owners on Polish and Finnish social media and discussion groups. On the other hand, we mean materials elicited in surveys performed among students in Polish and Finnish vocational/secondary veterinary schools.

The first step should involve a thorough examination of a number of social media groups and online discussion forums dedicated to the care of pets from each country. Previous research on mediated communication with a focus on human-animal relationships, especially via social media,

has been scarce (Luttinen, 2018; Siuda, Aftańska, 2018), it is therefore useful to take up this new route. To draw more light on the broader context in which the ethical negotiation is taking place, the official advice of respective national pet societies – as ‘official’ bodies setting the norms of discourse and behavior - on pet euthanasia should also be taken into account, together with the way the debating actors interpret such advice. The proposed methodology constitutes a classical internet ethnography (Hine, 2015) and has the potential to generate enough ‘thick data’ for a contextualized and nuanced analysis (Wang, 2013). It could also be further supplemented and contextualized by a survey on attitudes towards pet euthanasia directed to all social media groups/discussion boards members.

After examining the media materials, some important research questions concerning everyday ethics of pet euthanasia could probably already be answered, at least partly. We predict the analysis to equip us with a better understanding of ways in which ethical norms are argumentatively established in online communication as well as of the role of pet owners’ emotions in the negotiation of knowledge on the handling of animals prior to and during euthanasia. The ample textual material that is readily available online should also be used to help establish at least some of the implied ethical traditions influencing the processes of reasoning and decision-making involved in animal death and euthanasia. By that point, we could probably attempt to formulate our first answers to the dilemma signaled at the beginning of this article: Why do the norms concerning pet euthanasia seem to differ so strongly between the analyzed countries?

In the second step, we see the need to contrast and compare the discourses employed by pet owners with attitudes of young people acquired in the context of professional education, thus illuminating the interconnection between levels of ‘official’ knowledge imposed ‘from above’ by schoolbooks and teachers, ideas circulating in wider social discourse as well as personal experiences with caring for animals in a school setting. To

contextualize the survey results obtained from students, interviews with school faculty might also be necessary at this stage.

Every educational institution preparing young people to enter the labor market and pursue a specific profession inevitably prepares them also for entering the social realm. Educational sciences generally regard schools as places where students not only acquire the necessary knowledge and proficiency in producing goods and providing services, but also enter the wider world of values. According to Roman Ingarden, vocational and professional schooling 'would lose all its meaning and purpose if values were not taken into account' (Ingarden, 1998, p. 100) and analyzed as either present or absent from professional programs. In this sense, modern vocational education is also tasked with the formation of personality through the development of the human mind, character, will, agency and effectiveness, as well as through shaping positive attitudes and a workable ethical value system.

The educational curricula of both secondary veterinary schools and academic veterinary programs include compulsory classes aimed at providing the student with knowledge, skills, and social competences in the field of professional ethics and deontology. The topics covered in such classes span a wide range of issues and include discussions of ethical systems used in natural sciences as well as civilizational, cultural, and religious contexts of ethical reasoning and decision-making. We posit that veterinary ethics, just as any other professional ethics, should fulfill the following tasks: 1. regulating the proper conduct of the professionals; 2. determining their attitude towards objects upon which they act (animals) and ensure that rules and values that those objects stand for are not breached; 3. guarding the professionals against possible temptations inherent to the work they perform; 4. increasing the professional standing of employees by ensuring their proper moral conduct and compliance with specific standards of their profession. With regard to issues related to the ethics of animal

death and the circumstances in which animal euthanasia/killing becomes the procedure of choice, medical liability and its consequences are of particular importance. The same is true for the principle of *primum non nocere*. Without a doubt, candidates for the profession of veterinarians should be aware, and are indeed taught, that compliance with ethical principles is one of the significant elements of ensuring the well-being of their patients. The question to explore here is how the taught principles actually correspond with students' own perceptions, ideas and concepts of animal death.

The second step of the discussed research scenario, described above, should enable us to understand how young people negotiate the everyday ethics of animal death in an educational context that forces them to encounter it on a regular basis. We should also be able to illuminate the ways in which dominant textbook discourses are translated into young people's practical work with animals. What ethical and conceptual traditions are implied in the knowledge production on the ethics of animal death in a school context, and (how) do they differ from views of veterinary students and veterinarians?

So far, there has been very little research on the attitudes of young people to animal death. Existing studies take up more general questions pertaining to the relationship that children and youth form with animals (Tammi et al., 2020; Schuurman, 2017b; Morrow, 1998). Research has concentrated on undergraduate students of veterinary medicine (Valros, Hänninen, 2018; Cynk, 2019); one Finnish study on animal ethics in secondary education omitted pets, examining only farm animals, and did not address animal death (Alasalmi, 2010). Our study proposes to fill this lacuna using the sociology-of knowledge approach compared with survey research in secondary schools.

The postulated two-tier research approach has the potential to shed light on the formation of ethical concepts and communicatively shared 'common knowledge' used by actors intimately involved in animal care and

well-being. This social knowledge is informed by the historical understandings of the nature of animals and their role in society, influenced by religious beliefs of pet owners and presupposes an ‘ethicality’ of certain killing modes as opposed to others. These stances, in turn, are influenced by wider social debates on animal suffering and killing, but also on human euthanasia.

### **Conclusions**

In this article, we sketch out a possible research avenue that can account for the observed differences between attitudes towards animal death and euthanasia in two countries, Poland and Finland. We discuss previous and contemporary research approaches and signal lacunas that need to be filled in order to understand not only the changing dynamics of the public perceptions of animal euthanasia and killing, but also, more broadly, new ideas concerning the human-animal relationship and possibly also human euthanasia.

We propose to use the sociology-of-knowledge approach (Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Keller, 2012) as an umbrella theory to examine a wide collection of materials gathered from social media, insights from interviews with actors involved in moderating online discussions, surveys distributed to students in secondary vocational veterinary education and interviews with the school staff.

Our two-tiers approach facilitates a deeper exploration of the complex issues of formation of popular beliefs, attitudes and ‘knowledges’ on animal death, and the human role in it. It constitutes a research proposition formulated with the aim to tease out the building blocks of ‘everyday ethics’ involved in human reasoning on and execution of animal death.

Simultaneously, we believe that this research setting enables an exploration of possible connections between everyday ethical reasoning

involved in both animal and human euthanasia, as far as such connections exist. In the academic realm and the animal rights community, the arguments advocating for the possibility of both animal and human euthanasia often overlap (Singer, 1979; Rachels, 1980). The reception of such arguments in the wider public realm has been characterized by much controversy, often driven by religious belief. The spread of such debates into the wider public sphere is evident nowadays, as more and more countries legalize euthanasia for various categories of patients (Mroz et al., 2021).

If a connection between ethical reasoning on animal and human euthanasia is found, this would constitute a local example of the formation of common knowledge through trickling down of elite, academic philosophical debates into the realm of everyday life. It would also enable us to examine the ways in which arguments for and against animal euthanasia, so widespread in veterinary medicine, translate into the popular understandings of human end-of-life care, which until very recently was universally rejected by both the medical community and the wider public.

The proposed line of research on animal ethics is compelling and bears significance to several scholarly and broader social fields. For the specialized discipline of anthrozoology (social science approach to animal studies), it builds on previous studies that concentrated on pet loss and human grief after the death of an animal. Previous research stressed the emotional components of the process. We propose to broaden this perspective by approaching the subject through sociology of knowledge. This allows us to discern cognitive and discursive operations that produce knowledge and ethical concepts used by actors to justify their decisions on pet euthanasia. Breaking these processes down is significant as it elucidates the interconnections between animal and human ethics, which have been stressed in scholarship in recent years, especially by posthumanist approaches. They have also started to permeate the public sphere but have not been closely examined yet.

For the broader field of social science, the research sketched out in this article presents a welcome contribution to the critical scholarship on posthumanism, which has recently become the dominating paradigm guiding the ways we now understand human interaction with nature and animals. By examining the religious and philosophical underpinnings of the ethics of animal death constructed by pet owners and veterinary students, we probe into the actual realization of posthumanist premises in the life world of people engaged in the care of their pets.

By focusing on veterinary students in secondary education, we can contribute to a better understanding of processes of forming ethical convictions in a school setting. We focus on how students interact both with the media sphere and the 'official discourse' of textbooks and school faculty, and trace the intricacies of creating an ethical worldview of young people in their formative years of life.

In short, we attempt to offer valuable contributions to anthrozoology, sociology of knowledge, sociological studies of ethics and youth studies.

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