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Tinkering with Relations: Veterinary work in Dutch farm animal care

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, vets play a key role in the continuation, regulation and innovation of industrial livestock production. Extending studies of care in healthcare and farming and drawing on fieldwork with veterinarians, this chapter details how vets treat animals, coach farmers, perform animal welfare procedures or otherwise try to achieve 'good' farm animal care. Describing the different roles vets take on in livestock production, it highlights that vets are not only juggling different *forms* of the good, but also are part of different practices of *doing good* – each with its own care and accountability relations, and particular promises, challenges and limits. What emerges, is that while ethicists and animal activists elevate the relation to the animal as the primary ethical relationship, in practice veterinarians are entangled in, and operate in a web of relations. It is in tinkering with these complex relations, I suggest, that a situated form of veterinary ethics is 'done'.

Keywords

Veterinarian, care, veterinary ethics, tinkering, Netherlands, animal welfare, human-animal relations

Introduction

‘Resist, veterinarian. This is not animal welfare!’ [*Kom in verzet, dierenarts. Dit is geen dierenwelzijn!*] (Caring Vets 2017). This is the headline of a 2017 opinion piece in a major Dutch newspaper. It is written by an organization of veterinarians called the Caring Vets. The op ed was mostly signed by retired, companion-animal or ex—livestock veterinarians. It specified, however, that several vets working at the Netherlands Food and Consumer Safety Authority (NVWA) and in the intensive livestock production industry subscribed to the content of the piece but ‘pulled out for fear of the possible consequences of openly supporting [the initiative].’ (ibid, 2017).

The ‘bioindustry’ has been a source of controversy in the Netherlands for decades, with activists speaking out about animal welfare issues such as battery chicken, veal crates, barn fires and the disposal of young male animals as ‘waste’. Concerns over the environmental effects and sustainability of keeping over 100 million farm animals in a densely populated country, where over half of the land is used for agriculture and horticulture, further increase the pressure on the livestock sector to change.

This op ed was the first time that veterinarians joined the debate so publicly with such a critical, activist position in the media. The Caring Vets had thrown the ‘cat among the pigeons’, this much was obvious. Bringing their ethical concerns into the public eye had threatened an alliance between vets working in the livestock industry, and the farmers who they work with and who pay them. This became clear when the Royal Dutch Veterinary Association (KNMvD) responded with an open letter addressed to livestock farmers (Voorhorst, 2017). The letter seemed set on damage control. Its writers first anticipated, and expressed understanding for a possible emotional response of the farmers to the op ed – ‘Angry? Sad? Or maybe just tired?’ – and then emphasized the collective efforts of farmers and vets: ‘Together we work very hard, often at ungodly hours, to produce food for citizens and consumers.’ It then strategically restated the message of the op ed: ‘Who reads carefully, calmed after the initial emotion, will however see that the real message in the paper is: Veterinarian, keep being critical of the system in which you work and let’s *together* make sure that the system continues to

develop toward becoming even more sustainable.’ (ibid, 2017, italics my emphasis). Thus, the response of the Society did not take a stance for or against the content of the message, but rephrased it in a way that performs vets and farmers as a community with a common value orientation.

The response interpellated farmers as professionals who – like vets – surely are willing to change and look critically at their own work, while inviting an audience of concerned citizens to trust those involved to commit to improvement. Where the op ed paints a picture of vets supporting ‘business as usual’, as uncritical cogs in the machine, the letter of the professional organization made it hard for its readers to accuse vets of complacency. Against the call to ‘resist’ of the Caring Vets, emerges the equally but quite differently normative invitation to ‘continue to improve together’.

In the response, we see a double move of translation of the initial critical message of the Caring Vets: on the one hand, it aimed to repair the public legitimacy of and trust placed in farming; on the other, it secured the veterinary profession’s place within it. It is a crafty instance of managing relations; a skill which, or so I will suggest in this chapter, is crucial for veterinarians’ involvement in the livestock industry.

In the Netherlands, vets play a key role in the continuation, regulation and innovation of industrial livestock production. Extending studies of care in healthcare and farming (Mol, 2008; Mol et al., 2010; Singleton, 2012), this chapter details how vets treat animals, coach farmers, perform animal welfare procedures or otherwise try to achieve ‘good’ farm animal care.

In doing so, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with veterinarians. As animal health care providers, they often have long-standing relations with farmers, their clients. They regularly visit farms, performing practical tasks and advising the farmer about management and prevention issues around animal health.

Most of the veterinary practitioners I talked to worked in the dairy and pork industry, although many also occasionally treated animals other than cows or pigs, such as horses, goats or pets. In total, I

interviewed 20 veterinarians, recruited through the KNMvD and through a call in a professional journal for vets, and observed some of them in their work. I asked them about their daily work routines, and their vision of their profession and the livestock industry. I particularly inquired about the dilemma's they encounter in their work, while interacting with farmers and animals.

In exploring the specificities of veterinary care, my question is not: *do* vets working in the industry make a difference? Instead, I want to understand what is at stake in the practices through which vets aim to make a difference: *How* can these vets make a difference, what action radius do they have and what does their agency consist of? Rather than the problem being a matter of vets failing to 'do the right thing', I suggest the complexity lies in the many modes of 'doing good' that vets in farm animal care are engaged in.

Vets in livestock production

The job of veterinarians is to ensure good farm animal care; but what does this entail? The 'code for the veterinarian' [*code voor de dierenarts*] of the KNMvD states that vets 'should respect, promote, repair and/or guard the welfare and health of the animals in their care', recognizing the 'intrinsic worth' of the animal (2010). In their op ed, the Caring Vets remind their colleagues of these responsibilities. In so doing, they stress the relation of vets to animals as the primary ethical relationship. It is, however, only quite recent that the protection of animal suffering *for the sake of* the animal appears as a valid and even principal responsibility of veterinarians.

In his history of the Dutch veterinary profession, Offringa (1983) mentions the historically different 'value orientation' of medical doctors and veterinarians. Whereas doctors have been admired for their ability to save human lives, the veterinary profession gained its legitimacy primarily from its economic contributions. Predecessors of the current veterinarian performed practical work on farms, or fixed up horses during wars. Following the medical revolutions of Pasteur and Koch at the end of the 19th

century, vets' crucial role in preventing the spread of zoonotic diseases and securing food safety further strengthened their academic and societal standing. It is mainly with the advent of pet culture, after the second world war, that protecting animals from suffering became a central part of the veterinarian's vocation.

Mark¹, one of the vets I interviewed, active in the professional organization, explained it thus to me:

We have many responsibilities: to the farmer of course, because he hires us. To the animal – we are animal doctors², after all. To society we have a responsibility; think about the effects of using antibiotics. And uhm, I mostly work in the pig industry, and they also want me to contribute to their quality assurance schemes. Ok. But the interests of the animal and those of the farmer, are sometimes completely contradictory. And the same goes for the animal and society, right; the animal wants antibiotics, but society says; be careful with that. And I am in the middle of all of it and have to weigh all those contradictory interests... I have to find a balance there.

While Mark explains all of this, he draws the various actors involved – farmer, animal, society, industry – on a piece of paper. In the middle, he writes 'vet', drawing arrows from the middle to all these interested parties. When he finishes, he pauses and underscores the arrow towards the farmer: 'And then my problem is that only one of those pays my bill.'

What emerges from Mark's illuminating drawing, is that good care for farm animals involves fostering multiple 'objects of care' (Law, 2010). When veterinarians care for farm animals, they also care for the farmer's livelihood, the consumer who will eat their meat, the animal's ecology, including the animals around it, and the credibility of laws, regulations, and their profession.

¹ To protect the privacy of my informants, I use pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

² In Dutch, the common word for veterinarian is *dierenarts*, which translates literally as animal doctor.

In relation to these objects of care, 'good' and 'bad' forms of caring for animals emerge. These 'goods' and 'bads', however, often do not align. There are tensions: what is good for a sick animal might not be good for a society in which antimicrobial resistance is on the rise. They cannot be added together in a single, overall calculus, that ends in an obvious verdict.

In theory, and on Mark's piece of paper, it is possible to lay out all these different stakes and normativities, what is good and bad in relation to what. Such a form of ordering performs the relation between the different values relevant to veterinary care as *dilemmas*, as alternatives that present themselves, about which a vet or the farmer has to make a *decision*. This staged relation between various interests and ideals mirrors the representation of ethical questions in philosophy. Classical ethics, firmly rooted in the liberal tradition, focuses the ethical moment in the situation, a bifurcation point, where an individual, a *moral agent*, asks themselves: 'What should I do?'

Veterinary ethics, like medical ethics more generally, has thus concerned itself with formulating the moral conundrums central to the work of the vet, often with the practical aim of formulating rules or guidelines such as the code for the veterinarian. Bernard Rollin, for instance, posits as the fundamental ethical question in veterinary medicine: 'Does the veterinarian have primary allegiance to client or animal?' (2006: 27). He contrasts the model of the mechanic (staging clients as owners of property) with the pediatrician (performing clients as parents of the animals in their care).

In this chapter, I work in a different scholarly tradition, set in anthropology and science and technology studies, which explores care in practice (Mol et al., 2010) as a form of 'empirical ethics' (Pols, 2015; Willems & Pols, 2010). Such studies have shown that although dramatic ethical dilemmas do occur in health care, they are relatively rare. Most of what happens in care practices is more mundane, smaller, and immediate. And it does not necessarily hinge on *decisions* staged in delineated moments: what do I do now? Instead, it has to do with getting things practically realized.

Health care practitioners generally do not *choose* between different, often contrasting *goods* and *bads*, but aim to somehow work with them through *tinkering* (Mol, 2008). This might mean establishing routines through which dilemmas do not present themselves in the first place, or developing skills that help to reconcile incongruous demands.³ Along the way, health care workers as well as patients improvise as they encounter what is and isn't possible from where they stand – physically, emotionally, financially or in some other practical way.

Like human health care, veterinary care is a complex practice, set amidst contentious sets of relations and diverging commitments. This begs the question how veterinarians deal with such complexities in practice. In the following, I outline two different practices of 'doing good' that vets are involved in; daily veterinary care and the monitoring schemes of the state and industry. As we will see, tinkering is crucial to the work of veterinarians, too. In particular, I suggest managing relations, a mostly tacit skill that consists of non-technical, 'social' tinkering, is at the heart of veterinary work.

Improvement through advice

On a grey day in November 2020, I join veterinarian Lukas on one of his regular visits to a farm. He visits this farm every month and knows his way around. He does not wait for the farmer to come out, but changes into an overall and boots, and hands me one as well. Since my pair are way too big for me, I shamble behind him into the calf pen, where Lukas gives the youngest calves an anesthetic through a syringe on their head, so they can be dehorned later. When that is finished, we move inside the house, where we meet Jack, the farmer, in the kitchen. Before the visit, back at the veterinary clinic, Lukas showed me a printout of the milk data of Jack's cows, supplied by the dairy company. Lukas carefully studied the data on protein and ureum content and milk yield, explaining what the

³ See farmers' 'skilled craftwork' in practicing biosecurity (Higgins et al., 2018). See also Driessen's notion of 'will-work' (2017), which entails care workers' inventive strategies of aligning 'wanting' of professions and dementia patients; and Brüggemann et al on how health professionals prevent and find ways out of potentially abusive situations (2019).

numbers mean. He paid particular attention to the 'Somatic Cell Count' of the farm as a whole and of the individual cows; a high cell count is a sign that a cow is fighting off an infection (often in the udders) and thus an indication of poor milk quality and animal health. Lukas showed me that at the particular farm we are visiting that morning, the overall cell count is rather high; 'there is probably an issue with subclinical mastitis'. And now, at the kitchen table, after a short conversation on Jack's recent doctor's visits for his painful hip, Lukas brings up the topic of the cell count. Jack sighs and mentions that he inoculated his cows against mastitis for some time, but stopped doing that now. Lukas counters: 'I think it would be a good idea to continue.' He puts up his hands as if in surrender: 'I understand it is a lot of money though. It's your choice, you are the boss.' Jack seems to resist the topic, he shrugs and smiles, seemingly thinking: 'that's right'.

Lukas tries again: 'If you ask me, what is the best way to tackle this, then there are four things important...' – and he counts them down on his hands: '1. Continue to vaccinate; 2. Use disinfectant foam on the teats prior to milking [to prevent cross-infection]; 3. Place an antibacterial foot bath so the cows go through that before they re-enter the barn; and 4. Split up your herd and keep your cows with a higher cell count separate, so they don't infect the others. Did you ever do something like this?' Responding to the second recommendation, Jack replies: 'well, using the foam takes me fifteen minutes per milk round, so an extra half an hour a day, I just don't have the time for this. And separating the herd... I tried this once, but it just wasn't feasible logistically, with the stable I have.' 'It's a lot of work, I understand', says Lukas, rounding off the topic for now. On his next visit, Lukas will bring up the topic again, inquiring whether Jack has thought about implementing any of the measures he suggested.

This described visit highlights how the modern veterinary practitioner is no longer just a practical problem solver, but a consultant of herd health, offering their expertise to improve farm management. A lot of the daily work of vets nowadays, then, consists of giving advice, on topics of concern that either they or the farmer bring to the table. For the vets I talked to, a lot of pride and joy comes from

being able to improving the lives of animals and that of their farmers through changes in biosecurity measures, stable equipment, food regimens or vaccination schemes. When I ask what she enjoys most in her work, Karin, a hog vet, replies:

With the nicest pig farmers, I just have... I learn so much from them. Really, they learn from me and I from them. These are the most fun visits, because then you can talk about the issues where I think we can still really make a difference and they will take it up.

Karin aims to 'make a difference', but to what exactly? As is clear from the way Lukas thinks along with the financial decisions the farmer has to make, vets are not just concerned with increasing the health and welfare of farm animals; they are also enrolled in the economic project of running the farm. In this practice of improvement, normative notions of what is good care for animals and the farm coexist, and entwine with, considerations about what is financially and practically possible.

In Karin's depiction of her work as veterinary consultant, the veterinarian is positioned alongside the farmer. Both are enacted as care givers of animals on the farm. But they are not equals. Although most of the time, veterinarians feel like they can make a difference, advising is also a less immediate, less concrete 'intervention' than treating a sick cow, or facilitating a difficult birth. Improvement through advice is a process; it does not just 'happen' on one visit. And sometimes, it does not happen at all. As Lukas' interaction with Jack indicates, there are definite limits to what changes vets can make in the role of consultant. They can advise to take a particular course of action, but in the end, the farmer is 'the boss' and decides on what to do. In other words, vets can try to motivate, challenge, facilitate and encourage farmers to do something, but they cannot force them. For many vets, this lack of agency can be frustrating. As Suzan, another hog vet, explained:

One of the farmers I work with uses a lot of antibiotics for his pigs. And this is just a matter on which we are not finding each other... He just... is not bothered by it. Even if he is too high legally on his daily dosage. At some point I tried it with a joke: 'Well if you get into the hospital,

no antibiotic will work for you, you will be resistant.’ And he just laughed. So this is someone, however you approach him, you don’t get to him. [...] I have tried convincing him in various ways that he needs to, for instance, heat his barn before the piglets enter; he won’t. Sometimes there are mice droplets in the pens, because he hasn’t cleaned them. So he is too lax, and I have told him so. But everything stays as it is.

So what are Suzan’s options here? She can refuse to be this farmer’s veterinary consultant – but then he will find another, perhaps less critical vet to do the work. She might have lived up to her principles, but she will also have lost a client. If she is too outspokenly critical, she will risk being fired, and what has she done for these animals then? Most vets who encounter similar situations – and many do – will continue to try, and try again, to push or gently nudge the farmer to make changes on the farm, however small.

One of the ways in which a farmer can be made to recognize the veterinarian as an ally and working partner, is by improving the relationship between them. This is part of the work of veterinarians, as Klara a dairy vet, illustrates:

So I try, my way of working is very personal, I get close. I experience the family life. I usually know the kids, their names, where they go to school, what they do. I visit newborns, I attend weddings... Birthdays I try to avoid. You should be able to get to a professional relationship, I try to create something of a distance, so you can keep saying the things you need to say, or to prevent them asking too much of you. Sometimes it’s necessary to take a step back, and let your colleague go a few times.

Often, farmer and vet work together for many years. The relationship of a farm’s principal veterinarian to their farmer is professional, but most vets do not forget that there is also a pastoral quality to their bond (Law, 2010).

There is a danger in this attachment, of which vets are well aware: too much understanding for the farmer can make one blind to the problems on the farm with regards to animal welfare and food safety. But if there is no trust, one will not accomplish much either. Klara describes her own reflective practice of shaping the relation with 'her' farmers, in which both attachment and distance is crucial. A productive '(de/a)ttachment' ensures Klara can be a support to the farmer, while also upholding her responsibilities to the farm animals under her care. At the same time, and importantly, a good relation also makes farmers accountable to veterinarians; it makes it harder to set their advice aside.

Improvement through monitoring

An important way in which concerns other than economic profit are being served in farming is through rules and regulations. Farmers in the Netherlands operate in a dense regulatory landscape; their work is governed by regulations pertaining to, among other things, housing and farm design, feed quality, medication use, and animal transport, variously meant to protect animal welfare, consumer safety, public health, and the environment.

To ensure the enforcement of these rules, farmers are legally obligated to register information about their animals' health, as well as births, deaths and medical treatments. At the dairy factory and the slaughterhouse, the milk and carcasses they deliver are carefully checked for pathologies and anomalies. These registration practices give the Dutch state, as well as representatives of the pork and dairy industry, a detailed look into the farm, at both the herd level and the level of the individual animal. If one of the values checked is out of range, farmers risk fines, losing permits, and loss of income.

Veterinarians' conduct is likewise governed through such regulations, which depict, for instance, which antibiotics can be prescribed for what health problem and when. Veterinarians, however, also *participate* in the governing of farmers. For instance, vets have a legal duty to report abuses to the

NVWA. And while in some other European countries, inspection is done by official veterinarians employed by the state, in the Netherlands, the task of checking European legal requirements pertaining to food safety and animal welfare is delegated to independent veterinarians. So-called 'assured veterinarians' [*geborgde dierenartsen*] have the legal authority to uphold European legislation for food safety and animal welfare on the farms where they work. Moreover, dairy and pig companies often mobilize vets as part of their quality assurance schemes. As experts in animal health, and as professionals who already visit farms regularly, veterinarians are thus asked to be the eyes and ears of the various governing bodies that farmers are accountable to.

One of these monitoring systems, approved and monitored by the Dutch government, is called the 'Cow Compass' (CC), which performs an integral risk analysis of animal health and welfare on a farm. With the CC, farmers can at present meet legal requirements as well as demands of Dutch dairy cooperations to have a certified veterinarian perform yearly assessments of the herd.⁴

As part of the CC, the veterinarian reviews the general farm data available, for instance the Somatic Cell Count, medication use and the number of sick and deceased cows. They then visit the farm and check the animals, paying particular attention to their health, behavior, as well as the characteristics of the barn. The vet records all this information by answering a long list of questions, following detailed instructions on how to score particular values. For instance, when rating the quality of 'walking space' on a scale of 1 to 5, they cannot give a score higher than 3 if a barn floor is made of concrete rather than rubber.

The CC compiles all these questions into seven dimensions that are relevant to the health and wellbeing for cows: milking process, feeding and water, housing and husbandry, animal welfare, work routines, animal health and youngstock. The program then assigns each of these aspects a score, again on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is risky and 5 is risk-free, and visually depicts these in a seven-pointed

⁴ The specific legal status of the Cow Compass has been under consideration and will likely change in the near future.

'spider web'. A score below 3 means there are risks that require attention. Based on the inspection, the veterinarian writes a report that is sent both to the farmer and dairy company.

The website of the CC promises that 'repeating the *Cow Compass* yearly will create an improvement cycle'⁵ for the farmer, as risks and points to work on are flagged. When I visit veterinarian Tanja in the clinic where she works, she shows me what the CC looks like on the computer:

Here for instance you see [scrolls down] food management... and that on this farm that water quality is inadequate, walking space too... Anyway that's how you score it. [points on the screen] Here's antibiotic use... that is for young stock 8,36. So an average calf on this farm will be on antibiotics for 8,36 days a year. That is rather high, compared to other farms. So these are all things... I will flag this with the farmer. You try to see where there are problems in the stable or in the animals' health, and where we can add something.

The CC spans all aspects of animal husbandry that are relevant to veterinary care in dairy farming. For this reason, Tanja thinks the CC is 'a good tool', which helps her bring aspects of management to the farmer's attention that are important to animal health and wellbeing. At the same time, she felt its obligatory nature made it difficult for farmers to take home the lessons it offered:

It is now forced down the throats of the people who didn't want to do it. And that is not always easy. But well, they want to supply milk, so they will have to. But it is more fun with someone who is motivated than with someone who considers this an obligation.

More vets explained to me that monitoring systems such as the CC are an important source of friction and irritation at the farm. For instance, Peter explained he recently had to conduct the assessment for a farm he visits every two weeks. Not only does he already have an intimate knowledge of the animals and the characteristics of the farm, he continuously works together with the farmer on optimizing the cows' health and wellbeing. For him, on that farm, the imposed 'improvement cycle' of the CC felt

⁵ <https://www.koemonitor.nl/koekompas/>, last accessed 13 April 2021.

unnecessary, a disruption, and a waste of time – time for which the farmer pays the financial consequences. Rather than supporting his work, such obligatory assessments, then, entail activities that ‘often seem “other” to the daily on-going care of the cattle’, creating ‘discrete moments of accountability that may displace or at least colonize embodied practices of “care”’ (Singleton, 2010: p. 237).

Moreover, tensions ensue from the fact that the CC is not only meant to help the farmer and vet *improve* farm animal care; it is also an instrument to *prove* something to other parties. Schemes such as the CC provide the dairy industry with information of animal welfare at the farms their products originate from. This allows them to show the public and the government that their production systems abide by food safety and welfare standards.

Although there are officially no direct consequences for the farmer if the CC results in bad evaluations, what will be done with the recorded information remains uncertain in the elaborate, complex and shifting regulatory landscape around livestock production. Farmers feel that the procedure that claims to help them, is meant to control them. Indeed, a vet told me he suspects that if the NVWA decides to check on a farm, the CC will be one of the first reports they will request as part of their inspection.

Through governance instruments such as the CC, then, the livestock industry, farmers *and* vets are held accountable in specific ways to consumers, government, and ultimately the animal. But while performing their tasks of writing reports and scoring aspects on the farm, vets also become accountable to farmers for the nuisance and insecurity that these legislation and quality assurance schemes cause. Often, it falls upon vets to explain these schemes and their changes to farmers. Thereby, vets risk becoming the ‘face’ of the rules on the farm.

One of the ways in which veterinarians mitigate this risk is by highlighting the performative nature of governance assemblages and the role both farmer and vet play within it. Rather than telling the farmer: ‘It is not okay how you are treating these animals’, several vets told me they would say

something like ‘what you are doing here is against the law’ followed by ‘hey, if the state inspectorate pays a visit, we will both get a huge fine.’ Some would explicitly say: ‘I’ll put my inspector’s hat on’, and then proceed to assess the farm. With such remarks, the vet emerges as equally constrained to the farmer; both have to play their parts assigned to them by forces outside of their control. The critique, moreover, is delegated to ‘the rules’ and ‘the law’. By separating themselves from their performative tasks, it is not the vet him/herself that asks the farmer to change; it is the industry or state inspectorate, an absent-presence that threatens to hold both the farmer and vet accountable.

It is through such creative tinkering with words and positions that governance can be made sensitive to the specific embodied care work happening on farms. Although challenging for the vet, they are an important part of what makes governance ‘work’, how rules and regulations actually enact improvement on a farm. While some of my informants felt it would be better if a veterinarian employed by the state or the industry would perform the inspections, some predicted that bringing an ‘outsider’ to the farm, ‘that would act as a policeman’, would cause even more frustration and tensions. It is perhaps because of the trusted relation between vet and farmer that state supervision becomes more effective. A farmer’s principal veterinarian is in a key position to translate legal and industry standards and regulations to the specificity of the farm and the farmer’s situation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored veterinary care in practice. I have shown how veterinarians often take on the role as advisor; but also increasingly figure as the farmer’s evaluator. Describing these different roles vets take on in livestock production highlights that vets are not only juggling different *forms* of the good, but also are part of different practices of *doing good*.

In farm animal care, the farmer and vet usually appear as a team. They work together on the health and wellbeing of animals, but also ensure that the farm as a business keeps running. While ethicists

and animal activists elevate the relation to the animal as the primary ethical relationship, in practice veterinarians are entangled in, and operate in a web of relations. It is in tinkering with these complex relations, I suggest, that a different form of veterinary ethics is 'done'. This form of practiced ethics, of care, is not so much focused on achieving a 'good', but on continuously changing a practice for the 'better'. It is not premised on judgment, but on improvement. It is a matter of trying over and over again.

Of course, this care practice has limits, risks and challenges. In particular, vets struggle with the fact that they contribute their expertise mainly through giving advice to the client-farmer, who ultimately makes the final decisions. Therefore, the extent to which they can make a difference depends on the quality of the attachment to the farmer. It is this relationship, therefore, that is carefully managed.

In contrast to the uncertainty and slow tinkering that characterizes such care, legal rules and industry regulations hold the promise of control, transparency and accountability. Increasingly, the veterinarian emerges as part of a governance apparatus, and is positioned as the farmer's auditor. At stake is keeping up standards on food safety and animal welfare. Potentially, the activities around inspection provide veterinarians with different ways of addressing concerns with the farmer, and ways of making a difference. In practice, however, they are also a source of friction, interfering with the work alliance between farmer and vet.

Vets' skill in tinkering with relations, once again, fills the 'gaps between [the] heterogeneous assemblages' (Suzuki, 2021) in which they are involved. In his analysis of the work of a veterinarian in the culling of cattle during the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in the UK, John Law describes the nature of veterinary care as 'an improvised and experimental choreography for holding together and holding apart different and relatively non-coherent versions of care, their objects and their subjectivities' (Law, 2010: 69).

However, the challenges veterinarians face in performing this choreography smoothly, I suggest, shed light on why vets rarely 'resist' in the way the Caring Vets, with whom I started this chapter, envision. Identifying, and speaking out against animal abuses would mean stepping out of the relations that make up daily veterinary care; including, crucially, the relation to the animal. It is a mode of doing good that does not fit the care that veterinarians are involved in on a daily basis. In fact, it threatens the very relations that practice depends on.

To close, I suggest that exploring empirically what 'care' becomes in veterinary work on farms, and detailing how veterinarians navigate between contrasting values 'on the ground', can help strengthen veterinary care. Not by holding it up to abstract codes and standards, but by improving it on its own terms. By exploring these terms, this chapter hopes to have made a start in doing so.

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