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History and Ethics of Keeping Pets: Comparison with Farm Animals

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Abstract Perhaps the commonest reasons for the keeping of pets are companionship and as a conduit for affection. Pets are, therefore, being “used” for human ends in much the same way as laboratory or farm animals. So shouldn’t the same arguments apply to the use of pets as to those used in other ways? In accepting the “rights” of farm animals to fully express their natural behavior, one must also accept the “right” of pets to express their intrinsic natural behavior. Dogs kept in houses for most of the day are being kept in an unnatural environment. So are rabbits kept in hutches, and guinea-pigs or birds in cages. These conditions infringe the animals’ *telos*. Dogs are naturally pack animals, so is a dog in isolation being denied its *telos*? Other actions more deliberately infringe *telos* and autonomy. Enforced shampooing – or even exercise; hair-cutting of poodles; putting animals in clothes; and tail-docking. If de-beaking of chickens is considered wrong, then the same must be true for tail-docking of dogs. One should also question the ethics of specialist breeding – especially when that results in physiological disadvantages (boxers with breathing troubles). There would appear to be no advantage to the animals in having such health problems and when these are the direct result of the breeders’ desire for specific cosmetic traits, we should question the ethics of the practice at least as much as when animals are bred for specific agricultural traits.