

Ethics in Pet Funeral Practices: The State of Liminality

Rosagemma Ciliberti¹, Ivano Malcotti², Linda Alfano¹,

¹Department of Health Sciences, University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy; ²Società Genovese di Cremazione, SO. CREM. Italy

Abstract. Social perceptions towards animals have, in recent decades, undergone important evolutions, towards a more inclusive view, focused on the recognition of the intrinsic value of all living forms. In this context, pet burial cemeteries are a testament to the human bond with the animal and the intensity of the emotional response that its breaking evokes, as well as an opportunity to reflect on, and improve, our understanding of the evolution of this extraordinary relationship. The most significant cultural and social changes on the subject will be highlighted in this article, through a historical overview of animal burial.

Key words: Animal cemetery, cemetery, sociality, spirituality, pet cemetery, human-animal relations, nature-culture, ethics.

Mankind and animals: ethics, rights, interactions

Animals have traditionally been excluded from all moral consideration.

The fundamental principle, at least in Western tradition, saw that the existence of animals as totally functional to human life and well-being.

Aristotle's position of clear separation between humans and non-humans, although not representative of the whole of classical Greek thought, is certainly the one that then had the greatest influence on the evolution of Western thought, in which the ethical model of 'dominion' was absolutely prevalent.

In the mid 17th century, the status of non-humans was also shaped by Descartes' mechanistic philosophy, which entailed an ontological reduction of the animal to mere 'res'. The extent of the influence of this objectification of the living, sustained by Cartesian thought, was so great that even recently the Italian National Bioethics Committee spoke of a 'great debt' of man to the animal (1).

In the medical field, even after the discovery of anaesthetics, researchers would dissect live animals for teaching and experimental purposes (2). In agriculture, practices such as: castration, branding, the application of rings, the cutting off ears and tails, are still wide-

spread, as are other cruel practices such as forced fattening, the softening of the meat of live animals (foie gras), and intensive farming.

Throughout this long history of exploitation and cruelty there have, however, also been voices calling for more considerate treatment of animals, even if not all people speaking out were truly motivated by a genuine concern for animal physical, and emotional, health.

Throughout this long history of exploitation and cruelty there have, however, invariably also been voices calling for a more careful treatment of animals, even if they have not always been motivated by a genuine concern for animals' physical and emotional health. For example, Pinker affirms that vegetarian culture itself developed for both religious and social reasons, such as respect for the principle of transmigration of souls and reincarnation, as well as due to the greater possibility of exploitation of a living animal over a dead one, beyond any desire for a recognition of animal life in itself (2).

The first genuine expressions of ethical concern for animals began to emerge at the end of the 18th century with the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who first shifted the focus from rationality to sentience. After Bentham, other philosophers, such as

Voltaire, Campanella and Hume, reassessed their moral stance towards animals.

However, it wasn't until the 1970s that various socio-cultural factors (the rise of bioethics, the birth of environmental and animal rights movements) and scientific factors (the development of neurobiology, ethology and cognitive psychology) contributed to the revisiting of the anthropocentric view and the extension of the moral horizon to non-humans (3-5).

The real turning point, towards a more inclusive vision, however, came in 1975 with the philosopher Peter Singer, who argued that what was worthy of moral attention did neither depend on whether or not the individual belonged to a particular species, nor on the presence of sufficient cognitive capacities, but on consciousness, according to a principle of equality that is independent from the qualities of the subject experiencing it.

The human-animal relationship continues, however, to be characterised by a strong ambiguity in which there coexist practices of feeding, exploitation, and sacrifice, together with relationships of attention and care that, however, often border on anthropomorphism and that, moreover, only concern a small minority of the species that populate the animal kingdom (6-8).

The peculiar condition of pets is well described by Sanders, who points out that animals are generally perceived as 'property' and are, therefore, excluded from the social category of 'person', while pets, on the other hand, inhabit a liminal space between person and non-person (9).

They belong to the cultural realm, live mostly in the home, have individual names, but, at the same time, are bred on an industrial scale, bought, sold and sometimes abandoned (10). They participate in the daily lives of their owners and in various communal activities, however, they also belong to the realm of nature, they are liminal creatures: they confuse and switch between binary positions such as nature and culture, object and subject, commodity and companion (9).

These animals sometimes establish extremely close emotional relationships with their owners, which manifest themselves with particular intensity when the death of the animal breaks such a bond (11). This relationship indeed has certain aspects that make it

special: interdependence, constant physical, emotional, and mental presence, non-judgmental acceptance, and the happiness of the encounter. The animal, in most of these cases, does not have a life of its own (independent from that of its owner), but lives totally immersed in the owner's world. Consequently, when the animal dies, its death takes away a large part of the person who has established a deep relationship with it.

The animal represents a sort of ancestral call to that same 'animality' that is inherent to every human being, to a way of being and relating that is more spontaneous and freer from mental conditioning and social obligations, of which, more or less consciously, every human being would like to regain possession.

The absence of the animal explicitly shows to its owners how its presence and companionship has made them what they are and, at the same time, reveals to their human companions their own transience (12, 13).

The 'loss' very often represents a harbinger of complex reflections on the transience of existence and the precariousness of existing. As Freud notes in his 1915 paper 'Mourning and Melancholy', the feeling of loss does not only concern the death of a human being but can also be experienced at the end of a love affair, the collapse of an ideal, the detachment from a relationship that allowed us to attribute meaning and form to being in life. Grieving over the loss of a pet involves, however, specific critical issues due to the frequent lack of understanding, and social recognition, of the suffering that accompanies it. The expression of grief that crosses species boundaries is, easily and superficially, framed in an attitude of anthropomorphisation of the animal, which delegitimises the public expression of one's grief at losing their animal companion (14). The lack of this recognition not only deprives the person of the social support, and comfort, that helps them overcome the emptiness of the loss, but also exacerbates their sense of loneliness at a time of particular fragility.

Buttler argues that mourning is made possible by a social context that allows both human and other forms of life to be mourned. However, sadly, some lives are, to this day, considered by many to be "disposable" rather than "grievable" (15).

Being able to mourn publicly allows people who have established deep emotional relationships with these creatures not only to receive comfort, but also to

redefine the boundaries of grief and emotions themselves. Moreover, the public portrayal of mourning for non-human animals can also contribute to a re-evaluation of their place in human sensibilities and spirituality, and lead to a worldview that challenges the normative framework arbitrarily defining which lives, human and non-human, are worthy of consideration (12).

Burial rites and the fate of pets

The burial of animals whose connection to humans is freed from economic or functional instrumentality is an ancient custom, present even in the earliest forms of sedentary societies (16).

Among the various animals, dogs, in particular, were those that had the most social importance and for which various rites of farewell including burial, mummification, cremation were performed (17). Such practices have sometimes also involved other animals, but only for dogs have they been so widespread, with the exception of ancient Egypt, where a huge number of mummified cats have been found (17).

In ancient Egypt, cats, dogs and other animals were frequently buried together with their owners.

Animals, in fact, played a fundamental role in the ancient Egyptians' daily life, one that cannot be matched in any other civilisation of the past. This is evidenced by the fact that, among the 700 hieroglyphs used in the classical phase of sacred writing, at least 150 are depictions of animals or parts of animals.

Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife also included the presence of pets, and their burial took on symbolic and religious significance. Studies have shown that the practice of the burial of animals and, in particular, of funerary inscriptions dedicated to them, also existed in the Hellenic world, although Theophrastus (322 BCE) describes it as a rare, exceptional, and excessive phenomenon, such as to provoke reactions not only of astonishment, but also of mockery towards the people involved (18).

In Central Europe, in the Pannonian Plain, excavation sites from the Iron Age (1200 BCE-550 BCE) in Slovenia and in Italy (Veneto area) showed how frequent burials of horses in necropolises dedicated to humans were (19). Even in ancient Rome, domestic

animals were often buried in family cemeteries or in dedicated graves, as animals were believed to be guardians of their masters even after death. Some Roman pet tombs were elaborately and richly decorated as a sign of the importance attached to these animals.

The analysis of the funerary inscriptions relating to animals in the Roman world therefore shows us an unprecedented vision of the relationship between humans and their pets, there the object and protagonist of funerary practices typically intended for human beings, and the expression of the recognition of a true individuality (20).

There are, furthermore, numerous animal burials found in northern Italy as well, which can be dated to the roman and medieval periods (21).

However, archaeologists have indicated a reduction in animal burials during the medieval and post-medieval period (A.D. 1050-1900), probably linked to the Christianization of Europe (22, 23).

Pet cemeteries, with similar characteristics to those accommodating the burial of deceased people, appeared in Europe and the United States towards the end of the 19th century as pets entered the domestic sphere, (10). These cemeteries offered specially designated burial sites and elaborated funerary monuments for pets.

Sander points out that American burial carvings for pets, dating back more than a century, demonstrate a widespread consideration of pets as members of the family, endowed with cultural characteristics close to those of humans (9). In particular, from the inscriptions on the graves of pets, scholars identify an evolutionary line in the consideration of animals over the last hundred years, expressed by both the growing tendency to use human names for pets, and their inclusion in the affective circle of one's relatives (11).

The first pet cemeteries were also established in the United Kingdom, where, among other things, were founded the first animal welfare society (1824), and the first animal protection legislation (Cruelty Act, 1849). The development of the Hyde Park cemetery in London itself originated from a request, in 1888, by the owner of a dog named Cherry for its burial in the park. This led a groundskeeper to allocate a space in his personal garden (24) where, over the following decades, hundreds of other dogs were interred.

From then on, publicly accessible pet cemeteries spread across Britain at a relentless pace throughout the 20th century.

With the advent of the Victorian era, pet burials became increasingly commonplace among those who regarded pets as full members of the family and wished to honour them properly.

Indeed, the pet cemeteries of the Victorian era not only manifested consideration for the animal and its inclusion within the family, but also expressed protest and outrage at vivisection practices that were considered cruel and unacceptable by an increasing number of people (10). Moreover, the burial of the animal in the cemetery was an alternative to the common practice of embalming it or disposing of it like any other waste (10).

It should also be noted that, as Tourigny points out, although skeletal remains and their archaeological contexts offer us some insight, the precise nature of these relationships remains difficult to interpret (24).

As a typically urban phenomenon the practice of pet cemeteries became widespread in Europe and worldwide in the 1970s and 1980s, in parallel with the growing concern for pets and the social acceptance of human-animal affective relations (11, 25).

In the last few decades, many pet cemeteries have been established around the world.

Some of them offer cremation services as well.

Over the years, animal burial practices have changed and developed into various forms. Some owners choose to bury their pets in their own gardens, creating a personal and intimate resting place. Other owners prefer to have their pets cremated and their ashes preserved in memorial urns or scattered in nature. Others yet would rather have designated locations where animals could be buried together with their departed companions. There are also those who advocate the elimination of pets through mass cremation.

The development of 'personalised' burial practices is accompanied by an increasing commercialisation of services for bereaved pet owners, such as bereavement counselling, self-help books on loss, and condolence cards for bereaved pet owners (26).

Towards a critical reconsideration of the anthropocentric notions of life and death.

According to the Eurispes Report of 2021, 40.2% of Italians keep pets in their homes, the trend is to have more than one. From 2018 to date, the share of those who have at least one animal has gradually increased: 32.4% in 2018, 33.6% in 2019, 39.5% in 2020 and 40.2% in 2021. Dog (43.6%) and cat (35.1%) are the most popular pets (27).

These data indicate a progressive inclusion, and appreciation, of the animal in the family.

Research, in recent decades, has also documented the beneficial effects of the human-animal relationship on a person's psychophysical health (28). This evidence has led to the development of various forms of therapies, made possible by the active presence of animals, for people with disabilities (29). Many animals have acted as co-therapists in facilities for the elderly, children, and people with psychiatric illnesses (30).

The critical aspects of this relationship, for both the animal and the person in need are, however, still insufficiently investigated.

Accepting to live, and to establish a relationship of care and affection, with an animal also means being more exposed to feelings of loss and mourning, since animals have, in fact, a shorter life expectancy than humans.

As observed by Anderson, the loss of an animal with which one has established a profound attachment, in many respects similar to those conceptualised in Bowlby's attachment theory (1969; 1973; 1980), activates psychological processes of mourning similar to those experienced when a family member, or close friend, passes away, since the aspect of the relationship is at the heart of loss, regardless of the species to which the other, or others, belong (31, 32).

As for humans, so for non-human animals, death is a process that unfolds over time and does not end with the actual event of death, in which only the physical absence of the other materializes, but one that requires a period of elaboration in which the owner, continuing in some way to care for the animal, can gradually acquire awareness of the impending of death and separation from their beloved pet.

The burial of a treasured pet, approaching in some way the funeral rite for human beings, can therefore help the owner to place what has happened, thus favouring an acknowledgement of the nefarious event and a process of detachment from the lost relationship.

In Italy there is a network of cemeteries and funeral services for pets, mostly regulated by municipal administrations, of which, however, little is known.

Pet burial plays an important role in helping people grieve, and in protecting people's mental health. It facilitates the processing of detachment, allows for the maintenance of an emotional bond with the departed companion, and offers a supportive community in which owners can share their experiences and grief with others who have suffered the same loss.

As Brandes argues, however, "it is in the realm of death [...] that the human-animal bond often manifests itself most clearly" (11). In a way, living with pets highlights how fragile life is. According to Butler, grief over the loss of one's pet involves redefining the limits of injury, and challenges the regulatory framework that defines which lives are important (33).

From a bioethical point of view, one wonders about the meaning to be attributed to the suffering experienced for a being whose status is unclear, or a liminal creature.

In this context, pet cemeteries can be thought of as spaces for the negotiation of mourning, but also as places where the boundaries between humans and animals can be redrawn.

Can mourning for the loss of an animal transcend species boundaries and challenge the very notion of humanity?

Certainly, the presence of pet cemeteries, and the way in which mourning is expressed, can be understood in light of the distinction between nature and culture, of those "broader social, political, economic and material-geographical processes" that are central to the anthropological modernity of the West (26:897).

Mourning for humans and non-human animals is increasingly governed by the same cultural norms and practices, although substantial differences remain. Mourning the loss of a non-human animal is, in fact, less socially accepted than doing the same for a human. It would be, for example, unthinkable to ask for a day

off work to mourn a deceased pet, whereas mourning a human being is not only accepted, but established through specific laws (34).

Pets are often considered both "grievable" and "non-grievable": their irreplaceability can be emphasised and downplayed in the same narrative, and the impact of losing a pet can be described as both unpredictable, and manageable (12, 13). Furthermore, although there is little doubt that many non-human animals can experience feelings similar to human grief, humans often deny other animals such emotional or existential depth (35). Therefore, different conceptions of the human-animal relationship at the border between nature and culture influence human emotions towards domestic animals, either by recognising them as legitimate, or as marginal and unacceptable.

Desmond describes the mourning rituals associated with the loss of one's pet as 'creative and improvised cultural practices, made largely possible by their marginality' (36). The uncertainty of these practices seems to be the very element which makes the grieving of these liminal beings possible.

It is in this state of liminality that cultural norms and behaviours give way to uncertainty, and redefine existing relationships (37).

However, as Kean (2013) points out, a pet cemetery is not public in the sense of open to all, but instead constitutes a specific 'animal space' where, unlike any other place, mourning for animals is permitted (38). Limiting the expression of mourning for a dead pet in these semi-public spaces accentuates the ambivalence of human-animal relations. Although they are loved and cared for, pets remain subject to human power, an ambivalence that embodies the close connection between dominance, affection, and love (26).

To explore the pet cemetery is therefore to explore the relationships between species boundaries.

Although the existence of pet cemeteries accounts for posthumous, and posthuman, liminal spaces - a kind of 'culture of nature' which goes beyond the nature-culture and animal-human divisions while problematising the position of the non-human dead, there is still an ongoing transformation of human-animal relations, as reflected in the provisional boundaries between human and non-human mourning, and the need for further research exploring similarities and

differences through comparative studies of human and animal cemeteries.

In this regard, it should be mentioned how official human-animal joint burials still are a rather rare phenomenon. At the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in New York State, humans have been buried alongside pets since the 1920s, and at the Tarn Moor Memorial Woodland in the UK, there is a special area for people who wish to be buried alongside their pets, separate from the strictly human cemeteries (11, 39). This suggests that it is easier to imagine a human like an animal, than a pet like a human. Humans can afford to recognise their own animal characteristics but, as Desmond points out, the inclusion of a non-human animal within the walls of the human cemetery can pose a challenge to the very notion of humanity (36).

Therefore, in the liminal space of pets, it is easier to bend rules and transgress boundaries than in the more stable cultural realm of humans.

In this sense, however, the blurring of boundaries between human and animal in animal cemetery practices also reminds us that humans are animals, and that joint burial can be seen as a symbol of the fundamental precariousness of biological life, a condition that humans share with all other animals.

References

1. Italian Committee for Bioethics. Animal testing and health of living beings. 8 July 1997. <https://bioetica.governo.it/en/opinions/opinions-responses/animal-testing-and-health-of-living-beings/>
2. Pinker S. *Il declino della violenza*. Milano: Mondadori; 2013.
3. Martini M, Penco S, Baldelli I, Biolatti B, Ciliberti R. An ethics for the living world: Operation methods of animal ethics committees in Italy. *Ann Ist Super Sanità* 2015; 51(3):244-7.
4. Ciliberti R, Martini M, Bonsignore A, Penco S. Break with tradition: donating cadavers for scientific purposes and reducing the use of sentient beings. *Ann Ist Super Sanità* 2016; 52(2):261-8.
5. Gulino M, Patuzzo S, Baldelli I, Gazzaniga V, Merlo DF, Maiorana L, Murialdo G, Picozzi M, Armocida G, Cattorini P, Montaguti E, Bonometti S, Grossi AA, DeStefano F, Ciliberti R. Bioethics in Italian medical and healthcare education. A pilot study. *Acta Biomed* 2018; 89(4):519-31.
6. Baldelli I, Massaro A, Penco S, Bassi AM, Patuzzo S, Ciliberti R. Conscientious objection to animal experimentation in Italian universities. *Animals (Basel)* 2017; 7(3):24.
7. Ciliberti R, Monteleone R, Bandini, P Alfano L. The constitutional protection of animals, the environment, biodiversity, and ecosystems. Let's change: an invitation collected *Medicina Hist* 2022; 6(S1):e2022025.
8. Baldelli I, Biolatti, B, Santi P, Murialdo G, Bassi AM, Santori G, Ciliberti R. Conscientious objection to animal testing: a preliminary survey among Italian medical and veterinary students. *Alternatives to laboratory animals. ATLA* 2019; 47(1):30-8.
9. Sanders CR. Killing with kindness: Veterinary euthanasia and the social construction of personhood. *Sociol Forum* 1995; 10:195-214.
10. Howell P. When did pets become animals? *Historical Animal Geographies*. Sharon Wilcox, Stephanie Rutherford (Edit by). Routledge: London; 2018:11-22.
11. Brandes S. The meaning of American pet cemetery grave-stones. *Ethnology* 2009; 948(2):99-118.
12. Redmalm D. Pet grief: when is non-human life grievable? *Socio Rev* 2015; 63(1):19-35.
13. Schuurman N, Redmalm D. Transgressing boundaries of grievability: ambiguous emotions at pet cemeteries. *Emot Space Soc* 2019; 31:32-40.
14. Morley C, Fook J. The importance of pet loss and some implications for services. *Mortality* 2005; 10(2):127-43.
15. Butler J. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso; 2009.
16. Collier ID. More than a bag of bones: a history of animal burials. Margo DeMello (Edit by). *Mourning Animals: Rituals and Practices Surrounding Animal Death*. East Lansing: MSU Press; 2016.
17. Morey DF. Burying key evidence: the social bond between dogs and people. *J Archaeol Sci* 2006; 33:158-75.
18. Garulli V. Gli epitaffi greci per animali. Fra tradizione epigrafica e letteraria. <https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/media/pdf/books/978-88-97735-95-3/978-88-97735-95-3-ch-03.pdf>
19. Reggiani P. Analisi archeozoologica e restauro del cavallo della tomba 49. Giovanna Gambacurta, Marta Mascardi, Maria Cristina Vallicelli (Edit by). *Figlio del lampo, degno di un re. Un cavallo veneto e la sua bardatura*. *Antichistica* 34. *Archeologia* 7; 2022:55-62.
20. Goguy D. *Les animaux dans la mentalité romaine*. Bruxelles: Latomus- Tournai; 2003.
21. Percivaldi E. Sepulture di bovini e altri animali in Italia settentrionale dall'età romana al pieno medioevo. *Quaderni Friulani di Archeologia* 2018; XXVIII:19-26.
22. Morris J. Mourning the sacrifice: behavior and meaning behind animal burials. Margo DeMello (Edit by) *Mourning animals: rituals and practices surrounding animal death*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press; 2016:11-20.
23. Licata M, Larentis O, Tesi C, Fusco R, Ciliberti R. Tourism in the time of Coronavirus. Fruition of the "minor heritage" through the development of bioarchaeological sites, our proposal. *Tourism Management* 2020; 21:19.
24. Tourigny E. Do all dogs go to heaven? Tracking human-an-

- imal relationships through the archaeological survey of pet cemeteries. *Antiquity* 2020; 94(378):1614–29.
25. Pregowski MP. All the world and a little bit more: pet cemetery practices and contemporary relations between humans and their companion animals. Margo DeMello (Edit by). *Mourning animals: rituals and practices surrounding animal death*: East Lansing: Michigan State University Press; 2016:47–54.
 26. Nast HJ. Critical pet studies? *Antipode* 2006; 38:894–906.
 27. Eurispes. Risultati del Rapporto Italia 2021. <https://eurispes.eu/news/risultati-del-rapporto-italia-2021/#:~:text=Secondo%20la%20rilevazione%20dell%27Eurispes,40%2C2%25%20nel%202021>
 28. Brooks HL, Rushton K, Lovell K. et al. The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence. *BMC Psychiatry* 2018; 18, 3:1–12.
 29. Atherton G, Edisbury E, Piovesan A. et al. ‘They ask no questions and pass no criticism’: A mixed-methods study exploring pet ownership in autism. *J Autism Dev Disord* 2023; 53:3280–94.
 30. Oosthuizen K, Haase B, Ravulo J, Lomax S, Ma G. The Role of Human–Animal Bonds for People Experiencing Crisis Situations. *Animals* 2023; 13:941.
 31. Anderson M. *Coping with sorrow on the loss of your pet* (2nd ed). Los Angeles: Peregrine Press; 1994.
 32. Archer J, Winchester. Bereavement following the death of a pet. *Br J Psychol* 1994; 85:259–71.
 33. Butler J. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso; 2009.
 34. Turner JH, Stets JE. *The Sociology of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2005.
 35. Bekoff M. Animal emotions, wild justice and why they matter: grieving magpies, a pissy baboon, and empathic elephants. *Emot Space Soc* 2009; 2(2):82–5.
 36. Desmond JC. *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human–Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2016.
 37. Shortt H. Liminality, space and the importance of ‘transitory dwelling places’ at work. *Hum Relat* 2015; 68:633–58.
 38. Kean H. Human and animal space in historic ‘pet’ cemeteries in London, New York and Paris. Jay Johnston, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (Edit by). *Animal Death*. Sydney: Sydney University Press; 2013:21–42.
 39. Maddrell A. Bereavement, belief and sense-making in the contemporary British landscape: three case studies. Catherine Brace, Adrian Bailey, Sean Carter, David Harvey, Nicola Thomas (Edit by). *Emerging Geographies of Belief*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; 2011:216–38.

Corresponding author:

Rosagemma Ciliberti
 Department of Health Sciences, University of Genoa,
 Genoa, Italy
 E-mail: rosellaciliberti@yahoo.it