

Breeder Ethics

By Roy F. Dvorak

"...nope, not in my lines ... "; "... Never heard of that before ... "; "...It is a result of something that you did..."; "...It must be environmental, my lines are clean ... "; "... How dare you imply that this disease is in my breeding program ... "; "...your dog probably drank from a stream when you were not looking ...". These are some of the excuses that you can and do hear from the proverbial "reputable" breeders when they are confronted by an owner of a canine that they bred and sold and the dog begins to display some strange behavior (it has a problem).

The breeder is confronted by the owner who describes the "strange behavior" and, of course, the breeder points the finger at the owner - it is not my problem, it is yours. The dog owner is caught in a dilemma since there is no way that they can prove that the problem is in the breeder's lines. They have the evidence, but they have no proof. More power to those owners that try and do prove that the problem does indeed exist in the breeder's lines. However, when the breeder knows full well that there is a problem in their lines and chooses to ignore it; when the ego and the dollar are given more weight than the welfare of the breed, when all they care about are the "numbers" at the end of the year, then the breeder has ignored the professionalism that is implied with their status of being a "reputable" breeder. The breeders cannot and will not say anything regarding any anomaly in their breeding program. By claiming that they know about any problem in their lines, they admit to the problem. The breeder lives with an implied code of silence. They have a standard of behavior that most people would describe as being unethical. So now do we want to deal with a reputable breeder or an ethical one?

This brings up the question of what is ethical, what is not ethical. What type of professionalism should a breeder act with when dealing with buyers? What set of principles should a breeder live by, and how should a breeder conduct themselves? And finally, should a breeder profess to a code of ethics? But what exactly is a "code of ethics"? By definition, ethics are the principles of conduct governing an individual or a profession. Take the definition one step further and say that the principles are "moral principles". Now the consideration of right and wrong actions are brought into the definition. Note that we have a "code of ethics" and a "code" is a set of rules or laws. So the code of ethics is now a set of moral principles, and principles are laws of conduct by which one directs one's actions. However, before this definition process becomes too involved by trying to define all of the words, let us succinctly state that a code of ethics is "a moral set of rules of conduct that govern an individual or a profession".

The subject of ethics essentially comprises issues that are fundamental to practical decision-making and so the discipline is closely linked with person kind (really man kind) in other fields of inquiry, such as anthropology, economics, politics, and sociology. Ethics, nonetheless, remains distinct from these other areas of study in that it is occupied not so much with factual knowledge as it is with values -- namely, human conduct as it should be, rather than as it actually is.

The earliest code of ethics in written history is the Code of Hammurabi. There were the moral Chinese philosophers, Lao-tzu and Confucius. These were followed by the many Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and several noted Christian philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas. All of these distinguished people argued to define what is right and wrong. By stating something or doing something, regarding an act that is wrong, a rational person makes a moral judgment. They are doing two things here: 1) they express a disapproval of the act, and 2) they encourage those who listen to them to share their opinion. The converse to one's opinion of a wrong act is similar when one pronounces that an act is right. The

beliefs, or moral beliefs for that matter, reflect knowledge of past experiences.

However, a fully rational person or breeder may support a particular type of moral code and yet not act in accordance with that code on every occasion. Universal egoism claims "Everyone should do what is in his or her own interests". Obviously, this is basically the easiest method to further one's own interests. This is clearly the example of the breeder who is breeding for the dollars or their ego and their kennel name and completely disregards the signs (phenotypes of previous breedings) and the written and verbal warnings of associates. The past history of the breeding(s) does not matter to them, only what their breeding will produce.

Ethics is generally divided into three major sub-disciplines. These are (1) metaethics, (2) normative ethics, and (3) applied ethics. What we wish to concentrate on here, are normative ethics. It is primarily concerned with establishing standards or norms for conduct and is commonly associated with general theories about how one ought to live. One of the central questions of modern normative ethics has to do with whether human actions are to be judged right or wrong solely according to their consequences. Traditionally, theories that judge actions by their consequences have been known as teleological, though the term consequentialist has largely supplanted "theological".

In each breed club, the members are essentially divided into 3 groups - the elected and appointed officials, the breeders, and the members. Obviously there is overlap of the 3 groups and there are rules that apply to each group. Perusing the "code of ethics" or "canon of ethics" or "principles of integrity" or "ethics guidelines" that some breed clubs have published on the internet, you see that the majority of the rules or codes apply to the breeders. Those people who are responsible for producing the dogs that they profess to love and cherish. The one main overriding code in all clubs is to breed for the good of the breed, or breed to improve the breed. The primary concern in all of these codes is the welfare of the breed that the breeder professes to love.

All breed clubs should have 3 main principles on which to build their basic principles from which all other principles are based. These 3 foundation rules are:

1. the welfare of the breed is their first concern
2. do unto others dogs as you would have others do unto your dogs
3. attend to others the way you would have others attend to you

Most breeders have a set of values or principles that they have in common with each other. In other words, they have a set of shared values. It is this common set of principles that allow us to agree with one another. So morality, in a sense, is a system of shared values where you want to decide on the best possible decision in all situations.

What exactly is this "reputable" breeder doing when they go through the decision process to breed for their ego? I must emphasize here, that no algorithm or formula exists for moral decision making. Moral decision making on the part of the breeder implies that they know the facts involved in a breeding and they give careful consideration to the moral principles pertinent to the parties involved. The steps discussed here are somewhat intuitive, since there is no "checklist" to follow in the decision making process.

In the first step, the breeder needs to gather information regarding the sire and dam so they can state their cause for the breeding. They know the relevant facts that they wish to use which favor their decision. That is, they have organized their data in a logical manner.

In the second step, they do the decision making, namely, what are the alternatives? At this point, they take into account the positive and negative consequences for themselves, other breeders, and the potential owners of the offspring.

The third step in the decision process is to use the ethical resources at their disposal to identify

morally significant factors. Every breed club has its own set of principles that is widely accepted and this set of principles is that ethical resource. Other people - breeders and fanciers - should be given autonomy when requesting their opinions. You want to do good by allowing this breeding, so you want the results to benefit others. The breeder should strive to model their behavior on a person of moral integrity whom others respect. And, your peers and friends are a source of personal feedback when they are included in the decision process.

After the breeder has consulted their resources, they present conceivable resolutions. This is a set of questions that the breeder must ask of themselves: What factors in the decision process must change for them to change their decision? Would a breeder of integrity arrive at this same decision in the same circumstances? What if everyone did this? Is this breeding right? Is the breeder satisfied with the decision? To some extent, the breeder is doing a sensitivity analysis of their decision.

At this juncture in the decision process, the breeder is justifying their actions. There is the negative and the positive justification of their actions. In the negative context, the breeder is simply coming up with excuses for their decision. For a positive justification, the breeder brings in others to observe their actions as reasonable and agreeable. And from the stand point of a moral justification, the breeder shows that there are moral reasons for their decision. The breeder's arguments are less convincing if they are based on poor reasoning or inaccurate information.

Finally, after you have identified the problem, specified the alternatives, consulted any resources, and tested the resolutions, you make your choice. And once you make your choice, you must live with it and you must learn from it. The learning process may be difficult, especially when the "reputable breeder" makes the wrong decision.