

## Euthanasia in Pets and People

Humans seem to care very little about the suffering of other animals. There is one group of animals we do care about, however: our pets. One way we show that we care about them is that we euthanize them when their lives are reduced to mostly suffering.

We assume that they would not choose to live in such a condition, and we put them to death painlessly and quickly. Why don't we treat humans we care about the same way? This is not a rhetorical question. If we did, it would greatly reduce the amount of human suffering.

"Because humans are different." OK, what's the relevant difference? Religious people say, "Humans have a soul." If we assume that a "soul" is some or all of the mental capacities that (most adult) humans possess, such as language, self-consciousness, a moral sense, an aesthetic sense, etc, I don't see why being like this would make us want to suffer unnecessarily. "Because having a soul means we had to be created by God, who therefore alone may end our lives. Euthanasia is playing God, which is a terrible sin." But even granting (contrary to tons of scientific evidence) that there is a God who starts and ends each human life, and cares about how we live it in between, why assume that "He" is opposed to our reducing meaningless suffering? If He loves us as we do our pets, wouldn't He want the same thing for us as we do for them?

Let's try a secular approach. Humans are different from (most?) other animals in having self-consciousness. That is, we identify ourselves as beings with a past (memory), a present (perception), and a future (anticipation). When we suffer, we can hope that our future will be better. Thus we generally don't want to die now, while there is still hope. With other animals we assume they wouldn't want to live with suffering, but with humans we assume that they would. But our reason can tell us that that hope is sometimes irrational, that our probable future is just more suffering. What then?

The biggest difference between us and other animals, of course, is that we usually don't have to assume what humans want, because we can ask them. (I'll consider below the cases—infancy, senility, coma—when we can't.) Everyone seems to agree that when a competent adult says he wants to go on living, this should trump his objective condition, no matter how hopeless. If he wants to go on living, whether based on hope, or religious belief, or whatever, we should do our best to honor his preference no matter how much it costs.

But surely this is irrational. If he wants to die, we should help him to die painlessly and quickly, just as with our pets. If he wants to go on living but his probable future is more suffering rather than less, we should try to persuade him that he would be better off dying sooner rather than

later. Suppose it costs more to keep him alive than 100 other people? (Sometimes it's not far from that.) Why would he have a right to that money? Couldn't society ration its spending to cases where it's rational to hope?

If so, then the cases where the patient can't express a preference become easier: simple utility should do it, as with the other animals.

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