**Euthanasia: An Ethical Decision**

How much is a life worth? Is there a price for medical treatment beyond which a life should be terminated because the person or his family cannot afford to pay any longer? Most people would agree that it is not ethical to put a price limit in this way on human life. On the other hand, this ethical dilemma happens every day in veterinary medicine. According to *DVM Newsmagazine*, a monthly veterinary popular magazine, the average price at which a pet owner decides to stop medical treatment for his pet and have it euthanized is $1,451 (“Of Life and Death”). Veterinary medicine has advanced considerably over the years, giving the veterinarian more ways to cure or extend the lives of pets. Even if the veterinarian has the means to treat the pet, however, he often must defer to the wishes of his client. Three-fourths of all suggestions for euthanasia are started by the client (“Ethics of Euthanasia”). The reasons for this can include anything from the behavior of the animal to monetary constraints on the owner to the health of the animal. As a life-or-death decision, pet euthanasia is an ethically challenging issue, an issue that veterinarians struggle with today even more than in the past. According to *DVM Newsmagazine*, “the newest generation [of veterinarians] would much rather serve the pet if it came to a question of convenience euthanasia – a change in attitude from the generation of veterinarians who were taught to serve the pet owner” (“Ethics of Euthanasia”). Moreover, veterinarians have a monetary interest in not killing off their patient base (“Euthanasia: Emotional and Costly” 24). Although the pet lacks a voice, whatever interest it may have in continuing to live hangs in the balance. Is there any way to balance the clash of interests that exists between the pet owner, the veterinarian, and the pet?

Who can we turn to in order to provide guidance to come up with a consistent rational justification for animal euthanasia that can also ultimately shape the laws constraining it? The
answer is ethicists. A clash of philosophies, however, is taking place inside the society of ethicists which parallels the clash of interests between the pet, the veterinarian, and the owner. On one side of the philosophical debate are the proponents of animal rights. This group of ethicists, the most prominent of which is Tom Regan, a former professor at North Carolina State University, argues that animals are fully thinking and emotional entities that require a similar “right to life” as humans (qtd. in Sandøe and Christiansen 114). This would imply that premature euthanasia of any type is as immoral as ending a human life and that the veterinarian would be in some sense guilty of committing murder. On the other side are the proponents of animal welfare. These ethicists, including R.G. Frey, argue that even though animals should be treated well, there are fundamental differences in the way humans and animals think that deny them right to life whenever human interests are involved. The pet owner, therefore, is justified in having his pet euthanized for any reason so long as it is done painlessly. Depending on one’s view in this matter, the veterinarian should either join his client in jail for the premature euthanasia of pets, or instead receive laud for performing his duty. Where a line can be drawn between ethical and non-ethical euthanasia depends upon how one weighs those experiences that are most important in life and death decisions. I will show that it is ethically necessary to allow pets to live, but only up to the point at which their quality of life is adequate.

Let me begin by exploring the current views about the ethics of animal euthanasia. P. Sandøe and S.B. Christiansen of the University of Copenhagen summarize the three major modern perspectives. These are that (1) the animal has no interest in life, (2) the animal has an interest in life but is replaceable, and (3) the animal has an interest in life that is worth preserving. I will show that only the third view is reasonable and that the first two views either make unrealistic claims or are impractical.
The main idea behind the first view is that it is important to maximize quality of life, that is, to ensure that an animal has a good quality of life for as long as it is able to exist. In other words, it is ethically desirable to minimize the suffering of the animal. R. G. Frey, a professor at Bowling Green State University, is the leading proponent of this view, which is also the most commonly accepted view in society (Garner 17). Its justification rests on the differences in the way in which humans and animals think. Frey claims that the thought processes of animals are different enough that they should not have the same moral rights as humans; according to Frey, animals can only possess what he calls “interests” (Garner 17). For example, an animal has an interest in having its basic needs met, such as the need for food. Only humans, however, have the ability of “taking an interest in things,” such as forming a desire for something, such as food. With desires come beliefs about whether or not the desires can be met (Frey 79). But beliefs only have meaning if there is language. “Without language, it is impossible for animals to believe that any particular statement (e.g., that the purpose of food is to satisfy hunger) is true or false” (qtd. in Garner 16). Since animals lack language, they therefore cannot be interested in things.

Why should this be important in euthanasia decisions? If wrong is done to animals, they cannot interpret the act as being wrong; their “interests” have not been violated. In other words, without language, animals cannot form desires about what they may want to do in the future; they, therefore, cannot take an interest in it. This leads Frey to conclude that the obligation of humans is only to be kind to the animals. For euthanasia, this means that the pet owner’s interests always come before those of the pet; the pet owner has the right to end the pet’s life so long as its death is painless. As a former owner of a dog that experienced a long and very expensive decline in its health, I can see some merit to Frey’s argument. To have put my dog’s interests above my own would have unfairly forced my family and I to suffer monetary stresses.
If my dog had no real interest in the future, then no harm would have occurred in ending its life at any point.

However, there are several problems with this argument. As pointed out by Regan, language is not necessary to have beliefs (Case for Animal Rights 39). For example, children must have pre-verbal beliefs in order to be able to learn language in the first place. If a child is shown a ball while someone says the word “ball,” the child must believe that the object is the particular thing that is being referred to. Without this belief, the association between the ball and the word “ball” cannot develop. This belief, however, must exist before language and is also a prerequisite for the learning of language. Since language is not essential for belief, one of the most important pieces of Frey’s argument can no longer hold. But Frey’s overall point would still stand if animals did not have beliefs, even nonverbal ones. Tom Regan, however, directly counters this argument by pointing out that the behavior of animals suggests that they indeed have beliefs: “We can assume that Fido the dog chooses to head for his bone since he desires it, on the grounds that past experience has taught him to believe that it will prove to be tasty” (qtd. in Garner 23). Similarly, a cat begins to purr as it approaches its owner’s legs, clearly with the expectation and belief that such action will lead to a response by the owner (e.g., petting) that the cat will find pleasurable. Therefore, animals exhibit preferences for things and have the capacity to initiate actions to see that these preferences are met. This means that animals have an interest in living, not so that they can make plans for their lives, but so that they can continue to satisfy their preferences. Regan asserts that death, more than anything else, impinges upon these preferences: “Death forecloses all possibilities of finding satisfaction. Once dead, the individual who had preferences, who could find satisfaction in this or that, and who could exercise preference autonomy, can do this no more. Death is the ultimate harm because it is the ultimate
loss” (*Case for Animal Rights* 100). This seems true since the motivation for living is the most basic purpose of evolution. Animals are constructed so that they do everything they can to stay alive until they can reproduce. Therefore, given that animals have an interest in living, how then is it best to address this interest? The two remaining viewpoints on euthanasia offer contrasting ways of approaching this problem.

The main idea that underlies the second viewpoint of animal euthanasia is that the quality of life should be looked at as the collective quality of life of all of the animals; in other words, the quality of life summed up over all animals should be maximized. This is based on one of the principles most often used by ethicists, namely, that of utilitarianism. This principle states that the most ethical course of action gives “equal consideration” to the interests of all sides (Leahy 15). This principle imagines that these interests can be weighed and summed up so that whichever side has the largest total interest should be favored. Therefore, larger numbers of individuals or greater interest per individual are advantageous. Peter Singer, a professor at Princeton University, applies this philosophy to the killing of animals by saying that the best action to take is the one which minimizes the suffering of all sentient beings, since all sentient beings have an interest in not suffering. Although this stance can be used to oppose the senseless killing of animals, it also can justify euthanasia. Singer says that it is alright to kill an animal that is not “self-conscious [if] it lives a pleasant life and, after being killed, will be replaced by another animal which will lead a similarly pleasant life and would not have existed if the first animal had not been killed” (152). Although Singer had in mind raising animals for food, the idea can be extended to companion animals as well (Sandøe and Christiansen 113). In the clash of interests between the pet and its owner over euthanasia, the owner has an interest in not suffering financially or from other stresses in caring for the pet while the pet has an interest in
not suffering or dying. However, many animals in shelters also have an interest in not suffering
or dying, but five million of them are euthanized every year (“Euthanasia: Emotional and Costly”
24). If the pet is euthanized and the owner acquires a new pet from a shelter, the interests of all
pets and the owner are served. This argument seems logical to me; however, it raises a question.
Is euthanasia only justified if the pet owner acquires another pet? It seems that Singer has only
shown a case where euthanasia may be permissible, but not where the line between ethical and
non-ethical euthanasia actually is.

The application of utilitarianism itself, however, has several problems. In order to come
to the declaration of an ethical position, this philosophy has to make a calculation of how much
benefit comes to each entity involved (Garner 31). The actual benefit, however, is often not easy
to measure and could be used to justify almost any position. For instance, if a pet was loved by
each member of the family to such an extent that its loss would cause them to suffer as much as
the loss of a human member, then utilitarianism could be used to justify keeping the pet alive
even if it were completely disabled and in constant suffering. In the end, Singer’s view does not
really offer practical guidance except in cases in which the pet’s death is in the interest of both
the owner and the pet.

Whereas the previous two views do not clearly argue for extending the life of a suffering
pet, the third one does. In this view, animals are not replaceable and have intrinsic value in
themselves (Sandøe and Christiansen 114). I agree with this view and will spend the remainder
of this paper discussing it. According to Donald Griffin, a professor at Rockefeller University,
nonhuman animals are capable of the same type of cognition as humans based, in part, on similar
neurophysiology. From his observation of the behavior of hundreds of species over several
decades, he claims that the communications he has observed in many species (e.g., the dance of
bees, the echolocation of dolphins, or even the hand gestures of an owner to his dog) suggest the capability of complex mental processes. Regan takes these views a step further saying that “perception, memory, desire, belief, self-consciousness, intention, a sense of the future – these are among the leading attributes of the mental life of normal mammalian animals aged one or more” (*Case for Animal Rights* 81). The arguments of Griffin and Regan lead to the view that animals have “inherent value” and that they should share the same rights to life as humans (*Animal Minds* 246).

To understand what these rights to life considerations are, we need to look at how euthanasia is viewed for humans. Regan lists the following three conditions for euthanasia:

1. The individual must be killed by the least painful means available.
2. The one who kills must believe that the death of the one who is killed is in the interests of the latter.
3. The one who kills must be motivated to end the life of the one who is killed out of concern for the latter’s interests, good, or welfare. (*Case for Animal Rights* 110)

These conditions are very important. Their satisfaction turns the euthanasia into what the name actually means in Greek, that is, a “good death.” The failure to satisfy these conditions turns the euthanasia into a murder. In the euthanasia of pets, the first condition is easily satisfied. The other two, however, are clearly not satisfied for the euthanasia of healthy animals. Any euthanasia which is driven by the wishes of the client alone (such as the result of monetary problems, behavioral issues of the pet, etc.) does not take into account the “interests, good, or welfare” of the animal (*Case for Animal Rights* 110). The client, in order to satisfy his desire for not spending money or not caring for a pet that, for example, barked too much, will have sacrificed Fido’s future possibilities of experiencing life and pleasure. Even if Fido could be replaced by another pet from the animal shelter that might have been euthanized, that would not offer a justification. Either euthanasia would be equally unethical.
Is animal euthanasia ever justified? As with humans, the only time animal euthanasia is justified is if the animal is suffering as the result of a debilitating disease with little hope of full recovery. Regan calls this “preference-respecting euthanasia” (*Case for Animal Rights* 113). This is similar to euthanasia in humans who are in the terminal phase of diseases. There are, however, two differences between this euthanasia and that of humans, which complicates the animal euthanasia issue. First, unlike humans, animals cannot express a desire to die, making “voluntary euthanasia” not meaningful for animals. Secondly, as Bernard Rollin, a professor at Colorado State University, points out, pets do not have the capacity to imagine how the suffering that they experience can give way at some point to relief. “… [A]n animal is its pain,” he states, “for it is incapable of anticipating or even hoping for cessation of that pain” (1015). From Rollin’s point of view, we cannot assume that pets would have the willingness to experience constant suffering, unlike humans, for the sake of some future event that they might find pleasurable. Likewise, since pets have no understanding of death, they neither fear it nor yearn for it. My personal experience agrees with what he is saying. My dog, even in his declining health, seemed to wear his pain just as if it was his natural state. Therefore, Rollin favors giving medical treatment to animals as long as their quality of life is adequate. The owner, along with the veterinarian, must assume the responsibility for making the decisions for the pet using the quality of life as the determinant. The discussion of the quality of life is really the important issue underlying animal euthanasia decisions.

How one might measure the quality of life, however, is not something that either Rollin or Regan tried to deal with and, until recently, has not been very precise or practical. Marian Stamp Dawkins, a professor at Oxford University, offers a method for determining an animal’s quality of life. Just as humans continue to do things we find pleasure in, so do animals. The
opposite is also true; animals and humans will not continue to do things that they don’t like. Dawkins qualifies these tendencies as positive reinforcements and negative reinforcements, respectively. When an animal stops doing things that came from positive reinforcements, it could mean that the quality of life of the animal is declining (Dawkins 940). I tend to agree with this. For instance, I do certain things repetitively, such as drinking orange juice in the morning, while doing things to avoid pain, such as eating distasteful foods. I would cringe to imagine if I got to the point where I was unable to actively do those things which made me happy while not being able to avoid painful things; my quality of life would be quite low.

This then brings me to a possible approach to pet euthanasia that uses the quality of life metric. As suggested by Rollin, the veterinarian should try to establish a dialogue with the pet owner even when the pet is young, including conversations about euthanasia (1016). This discussion should include a discussion of the “inherent value” and how that relates to the well defined point at which euthanasia may become permissible. She should encourage the owner to make notes of things that the animal does repetitively through positive reinforcement. Once the pet can no longer pursue those activities, the conversation could then turn to the possibility of euthanasia. By tying the euthanasia to the behavior of the animal, the client will be prevented from trying to prematurely euthanasia his pet. Moreover, the veterinarian would also be constrained from trying to force medical treatment upon the pet to force to live longer either for the purpose of maximizing his income or for the purpose of satisfying the owner’s desire to keep it alive at any cost.

In summary, veterinarians cannot ignore the fact that pets are living, thinking, and emotional entities. The conventional view of animal euthanasia regards human interests as always being superior to animal interests. This view holds that the lives of animals can ethically
be sacrificed in favor of human interests and that the only obligation of human to animals is to
give them a life with as little suffering as is reasonable that is ended painlessly. This view fails to
give enough credit to the sentience of pets. Many mammals not only have the ability to feel pain
and suffering like humans but also have an interest in living to see to it that their “preferences”
are met. This leads to the conclusion that animals are not replaceable and have inherent value. It
also implies that the justification for animal euthanasia is the same as that for humans. Therefore,
animals should be allowed to continue to live and be given medical treatment so long as they
have the ability to do any of the things that have given them pleasure. When they can no longer
do those things, euthanasia would become ethical.
Works Cited


