

Euthanasia—Clarifying Basic Issues

Veterinarians are often called upon to use the profound power of ending life. We commonly refer to the best practices of terminating life with the single term “euthanasia.” Upon examination, however, you will find that people use this important term in many different ways. The upshot is that fundamentally different kinds of practices have been put under the umbrella of “euthanasia.”

This reading (1) addresses some of the different practices now called “euthanasia,” and (2) points out some of the tensions created by using one term for all of these practices. Each professional must sort out these tensions for herself or himself—this reading will help you see how diversely the term is used.

The AVMA’s all-important code of practice, called the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics, provides at Paragraph X a short statement about the practice of terminating lives:

X. Euthanasia. Humane euthanasia of animals is an ethical veterinary practice.

As is the case with most brief statements (the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once advised, “Seek simplicity, and *mistrust* it”), the AVMA’s nine words on this profound power gloss over some important differences and tensions that practitioners or students of veterinary medicine—and, of course, individuals seeking veterinary services—do well to consider with great care.

The word “euthanasia” literally means, in terms of its Greek roots, “good death”—*eu* is Greek for “good” or “well,” and *thanatos* means “death.”

The meaning of this brief phrase “good death,” though, isn’t crystal clear, and thus not everyone agrees on the way(s) in which we might use the term “euthanasia”—in everyday life, the term is vague enough to support a number of different things.

Popular dictionaries, such as the 1943 edition of Webster’s 20th Century Dictionary, include simple definitions that begin to clarify matters—consider that the definition “a painless, happy death” introduces the issue of a death

that is pain-free. The English publisher Chambers uses a longer definition in its popular dictionary that raises the issue of the dying party's incurable suffering—"an easy mode of death; the act or practice of putting painlessly to death, esp. in cases of incurable suffering."

Lengthier and more formal definitions are, to be sure, around. For example, euthanasia has been defined by National Research Council (funded by the U.S. government) as inducing a painless death, in which the animal is rendered unconscious as quickly as possible in order to minimize fear and anxiety.¹

You don't have to read too far into the literature on "euthanasia" to discern that, for *some* people, an important distinction emerges between "euthanasia" and "killing." For example, Craig Brestrup uses the term "euthanasia" quite strictly, meaning by it *only* "taking the life of one for whom no reasonable alternative exists in as painless and compassionate a fashion as possible and for the good and in the interests of the one whose life it is."² Brestrup uses the altogether harsher term "killing" when shelters take the life of millions of healthy and adoptable companion animals that the shelters deem unadoptable due to a curable illness or a correctable behavioral problem, or simply because they (the shelters) need to make room for new entrants.

What drives critiques such as Brestrup's is that such intentional "killing" is the leading cause of death among companion animals. This is one reason that advocates who wish to protect nonhuman life are quite frustrated that the term "euthanasia," whose earliest meaning was focused on the death being in the interest of the dying individual, has been used for many terminations of life that are by no means required or in the interest of the dying animals but nonetheless carried out because the deaths are convenient for some group of humans.

A leading animal rights philosopher sets out in very harsh terms the kind of spirited criticism that underlies the debate over how the term might be used.

¹ National Research Council, *Recognition and Alleviation of Pain and Distress in Laboratory Animals*, Wash, DC, National Academy Press, 1992, 102.

² Craig Brestrup. *Disposable Animals—Ending the Tragedy of Throwaway Pets*. Leander, TX: Camino Bay Books, 1997, at 35.

To euthanize another requires that one kill the other in the belief that this is for his/her own good and out of concern for that individual's good. Euthanasia thus requires that one's motives be other-regarding, not self-regarding, and that the other for whose sake one acts must be the one who is killed. ... To persist in calling such practices 'euthanizing animals' is to wrap plain killing in a false verbal cover.³

In one sense, then, one might view the AVMA's nine words on this subject ("Humane euthanasia of animals is an ethical veterinary practice.") to be fewer than are needed.

Here are some hard questions:

- Do the insights that drive the ethical commitments to the value of each and every *human* life carry over to *any nonhuman lives*?
- Do the insights that drive the healing commitments of veterinary medicine compete with widespread acceptance of convenience killing of nonhuman animals?
- In terms of *human-nonhuman* relationships, should we be troubled by any taking of life that is merely convenient?
- Is it right for ordinary citizens, veterinarians, veterinary education, or even the veterinary profession as a whole to accept without challenge the common claim in this culture that human interests are such that we need have no scruples at taking nonhuman lives because the nonhumans' interests are always trumped by human convenience?

So, in a course where we examine the terrain we walk regarding contemporary human-animal relationships, we do well to ask if any party's approach, including that of the AVMA or the AAHA (the American Animal Hospital Association, which has a more negative view of convenience euthanasia described below) or whomever, is simply too one dimensional to help us address this very complex subject.

Another interesting question is this—can the AVMA, a powerful and respected professional group to whom society often defers regarding nonhuman lives, lead our society in use of, and restrictions on, this important and needed power regarding the many kinds of nonhumans with which we share this planet? Consider that the AVMA has, in the past, included

³ Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, p. 110.

materials in JAVMA that describe why the power to “euthanize” (or, as some say, “euthanatize”) creates problems. In a 1996 article,⁴ this passage appeared (at page 848):

One worker said, “I frequently tell people that it is easier for me to euthanize an animal than to talk to the person who brought it in.”

Note what may have been happening for this worker ... and for others who work in institutions where termination of life has become routine—the *mere* availability of a painless termination of an animal’s life may somehow permit people to avoid talking about the profound implications of taking a life merely because taking the life is easier than confronting the humans who are giving up responsibility for an animal.

So does this startling acceptance of “euthanasia” in place of talking to the human surrendering the animal suggest that *if* a profound power is available, *people will use/abuse it?*

Some major institutions are proposing new statements and approaches whereby the serious risk of abusing our power to terminate lives is minimized. For example, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) changed its position statement on “euthanasia” (that is, termination of nonhuman animal lives) in 2003 to say that ideally no healthy, adoptable animal should be the victim of euthanasia. The AAHA stated that would henceforth work to reduce the number of animals euthanized annually.

Some might be skeptical of how significant this change is, since the AAHA’s new goal *still* uses the term “euthanasia” for the practices that others call mere “killing.” Significantly, though, the AAHA now promotes the idea that whenever a life-terminating procedure is performed, it “must be pain and anxiety free and carried out with a sense of dignity for the animal.”

Bottom line—there is a debate over how to use and regulate the awesome power of being able to take or save lives. To be sure, the AAHA’s 2003 revision clearly is drawing upon the insights that led to the simple, literal meaning of word “eu-thanasia” or “good death”—that is, a death that is “good” for the animal because it relieves that individual of suffering.

⁴ “Emotional responses of animal shelter workers to euthanasia”
Debra J. White, MSW, and Ruth Shawhan, MSW, *JAVMA* 208 (6): 846-849, March 15, 1996.

What makes the debate over a mere word so important is that veterinarians practice in precisely the places where animals are given the chance of life or death. And veterinarians can and should make a significant contribution to the debate because of the profession's profound combination of commitments to science and ethics, compassion, and healing. This potential influence of the profession will endure well into the future, given that all of us are aware that the number of animals whose lives are terminated in our society remains extremely high.

The coming decades will continue to see, no doubt, debates of many kinds over which animals might be killed in what ways and for what reasons. These debates will surely be part of the environment in which today's veterinary students practice veterinary medicine.