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The Good Life, the Good Death: Companion Animals and Euthanasia

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the relevance of a relational approach to nonhuman animal euthanasia, focusing on companion animals. Recent scholarship in animal ethics, political philosophy and different fields of animal studies argues for viewing other animals as subjects, instead of as objects of study. Seeing other animals as subjects with their own views on life, with whom humans have different relations and with whom communication is possible, has ethical, practical, and epistemological implications for thinking about nonhuman animal euthanasia. In what follows I aim to shed light on some of these implications, focusing on euthanasia in the case of companion animals. I first discuss nonhuman animal practices surrounding death and challenge the view that humans have a privileged experience and understanding of death. In the following section I further zoom in on the relationship between anthropocentrism and assessing the harm of death for nonhuman animals. This provides a starting point for the next section, in which I compare human and nonhuman animal euthanasia in The Netherlands. To conceptualize how we can develop new procedures for nonhuman animal euthanasia I then turn to interspecies intersubjectivity, and humans' understanding of other animals. In the final section I discuss the question of nonhuman animal euthanasia as inextricably linked to the question of how to live well with other animals, on an ontological and practical level. I end by discussing the practical implications of this, and briefly investigate how humans can begin to develop new practices surrounding death, together with other animals.

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Keywords: *nonhuman animal euthanasia, interspecies relations, nonhuman animal agency, animal death, interspecies communities.*

Introduction

The question of nonhuman animal euthanasia is not often considered in animal philosophy. Animal advocates mainly focus on challenging the killing of other animals for human benefit, and often consider nonhuman animal euthanasia to be fundamentally different from human euthanasia. Nonhuman animals are thought not to be able to understand their own mortality or communicate about death with humans, even though they are increasingly seen as subjects with their own perspectives on life across different fields of study including animal ethics, political philosophy, and ethology (for example, respectively, Aaltola; Donaldson and Kymlicka; Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals*). Seeing other animals as unique individuals, with whom humans can have different types of relations and with whom communication is possible, however, has ethical, practical, and epistemological implications for thinking about nonhuman animal death, especially with regard to nonhuman animal euthanasia. Nonhuman animals encounter death, experience grief, and many of them understand the finality of death, sometimes including awareness of their own mortality (see for example Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*; King; Pierce). Human and nonhuman animals who form communities or share their lives in households will also inevitably encounter death. Within current power hierarchies, humans sometimes have a duty of care towards other animals, which can include having to make decisions about their death or continued life. In what follows I therefore investigate the relevance of a relational approach to nonhuman animal euthanasia, focusing on companion animals. Developing a critical perspective on nonhuman animal euthanasia is relevant not only with regard to improving individual decisions, but also in that it can challenge anthropocentrism within society.

The first section of this paper concentrates on nonhuman animal experiences of, and attitudes towards, death. Recent ethological research shows that other animals have their own ways of dealing with death, and their own forms of grieving. Using a human standard to measure these is problematic for normative and epistemic reasons. In the second section I further challenge the view that humans have a privileged understanding of death by zooming in on the relation between anthropocentrism and assessing the harm of death for nonhuman animals. This provides a starting point for comparing human and nonhuman animal euthanasia in The

Netherlands, to which I turn in the third section. In order to take nonhuman animal agency and subjectivity seriously, as well as interspecies relations, new procedures for nonhuman animal euthanasia need to be developed, in which the agencies of other species are recognized and taken into account formally. This requires further conceptualizing interspecies intersubjectivity, in order to better understand other animals. In the final section I draw some general conclusions, and discuss how the question of nonhuman animal euthanasia is inextricably linked to the question of how to live well with other animals, on an ontological and practical level. I end by discussing the practical implications of these insights, and investigate how humans might develop new practices surrounding death with other animals.

Nonhuman Animals and Death

Harper and Kohl, two mulard ducks, were rescued from a *foie gras* factory in New York in 2006 and taken to a Farm Sanctuary (King 39-40). Both of them were scared of humans and suffering from diseases as a result of the force-feeding they had endured. In the sanctuary, the ducks became inseparable. In the years that followed, they spent most of their time together, and chose not to interact much with other ducks. After four years, Kohl's condition began to deteriorate. When he could no longer walk, the sanctuary staff made the decision to euthanize him. Harper was in the barn when it happened. When Kohl had died, he lay down next to him, placed his own head and neck over Kohl's, and stayed in that position for some hours. Harper never recovered. In the daytime he sometimes went to the pond where he used to hang out with Kohl. He never bonded with another duck, and was more nervous around people than before. Two months later, he died.

While the story of Harper and Kohl, recounted in Barbara King's *How Animals Grieve*, may seem to be just an anecdote, recent research on animal cognition, cultures and languages affirms Darwin's view that differences between humans and other animals are of degree and not kind; this also applies to how nonhuman animals experience and respond to death, as the following examples show. Crows, magpies and ravens have mourning rituals (Bekoff, 'Animal Emotions'; Derbyshire). Crows also learn to fear humans who carry dead crows – they

communicate about this to others, and remember it for at least six weeks (Swift and Marzluff). Elephants are known for their death rituals, and they show interest in the bones of others (including ancient bones of unrelated other elephants). They keep visiting the graves of other elephants. They may also suffer from psychological traumas when losing others (Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*; 'Not by Bread Alone'). Chimpanzees have been observed using tools to clean the body of a deceased group member (van Leeuwen et al.). Mourning has been observed in many species, ranging from ducks and dogs and donkeys to chimpanzees (King). Some scientists contend that cetaceans can take their own lives.¹ Recognized by humans as highly intelligent, dolphins are believed to be able to choose to end their lives. Unlike humans, breathing is an intentional act for dolphins; if they want to die, it has been argued, they simply stay under water (Greenwood). Scientists continue to investigate whether whale beachings can in certain instances be regarded as collective suicides (Palmer).

Humans are only just beginning to grasp the depth of other animals' understandings of death (Pierce 470), but it is uncontroversial to state that all social animals experience the death of others, and that they respond to death and loss in different ways. Philosopher Teja Brooks Pribac rightly argues that the question of whether other animals understand death is comprised of two sub-questions: whether they understand the physical non-returnability of another animal, and whether they understand their own mortality, which requires reflective consciousness (78). In analysing nonhuman animal understandings of death, humans often focus on the latter. Focusing on cognition in comparing human to nonhuman animal grief, and privileging reason over emotion, as is often done in studying nonhuman animal grief and nonhuman animals' experiences and perceptions of death more generally (Brooks Pribac 70), is problematic for several reasons.

First, nonhuman animals' awareness of their own mortality is of secondary relevance in experiencing the death of others, since lack of such understanding does not preclude the feeling of grief (Brooks Pribac 80). Expressions of nonhuman animal grief may vary widely between and within populations, based on the relationship to the deceased as well as the individual's ontogeny and personality (King 7-10). While nonhuman animal grief is often viewed as different to human grief on the premise that humans may be able to consider the implications of death to a different

degree, this does not mean that nonhuman animals' grief is emotionally less intense. Here it is important to remember that grief is the other side of love. Animals of many species are entangled in relations with others. Those who love – and many other animals love (see, for example, Bekoff's *The Emotional Lives of Animals*) – also grieve (King).

Second, these considerations are often speculative: in many cases humans do not know whether other animals understand their mortality. Increasing evidence for nonhuman animals' capacities for bi-directional mental time travel and anticipation (Roberts), and for experience learned fear (Swift and Marzluff), combined with the fact that death is often a recurrent phenomenon in the lives of other animals, shows that humans cannot automatically assume that other than human species have no such understanding. Furthermore, research questions set the scope for the answers other animals can give, and are often based on stereotypical views of them (Meijer). In order to further investigate nonhuman animals' understanding of and relationship with death one should keep open the possibility that they comprehend more than is currently assumed by many humans, and study them as subjects with their own perspective on life instead of as objects that only act on instinct.

Third, and relatedly, taking human expressions of grief as a blueprint for interpreting the behaviour of other animals obscures the many ways in which animals of different species may express themselves.

Finally, this emphasis on reason and cognition is a western human phenomenon, and does not correspond to a universal truth. Responses to death and grief may differ between different human² and nonhuman cultures, and a dualistic view, in which 'human' is separated from 'animal' or 'nature', is a cultural construction. This construction is prominent in the western philosophical tradition (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*). A focus on cognition, in investigating nonhuman animals' relations to death, often serves and reinforces an anthropocentric view, since it affirms a human rationalist paradigm, in which humans are seen as categorically different from other animals and reason is seen as separated from emotion and the body. This view is not normatively neutral: reason is valued over emotion, and culture over nature. To develop a different idea about nonhuman animals and death, we need to move

beyond this anthropocentric view of death. Before I turn to investigating possibilities for developing a different perspective on nonhuman animals and death, I therefore first discuss the connection between anthropocentrism and determining the harm of death for other animals.

Anthropocentrism and Nonhuman Animal Death

In the history of western philosophy, the harm of death for other animals is often interpreted as fundamentally different from the harm of death for humans. Perhaps the most striking example of this is found in the work of phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger (*Being and Time*), nonhuman animals cannot die because they do not exist as ‘beings towards death’ – something they show in the fact that they do not use human language. Instead, they simply perish. He contrasts this with human Dasein, that understands itself as Being. Nonhuman animals exist in the world and they experience the world, but, according to Heidegger, they cannot reflect on and express their own being in the world and therefore have no access to the world as such. Heidegger sees a sharp line between human and nonhuman animals based on his assumption that other animals lack reason and language; he describes this as a ravine (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*).

Even though many humans would not go so far as to say that nonhuman animals cannot die, Heidegger’s view that humans are categorically different from other animals and that all nonhuman species can be grouped together, is still widespread. Philosopher Jacques Derrida (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 26-28) and others (Wadiwel, Wolfe) have convincingly argued that there is a connection between seeing nonhuman animals’ deaths as categorically different from human deaths, and the idea that there is little harm, or even no harm, in killing them. The latter idea is interconnected with practices that exploit nonhuman animals. This works as follows: viewing humans as categorically separated from other animals is often connected to viewing them as superior to other animals; viewing humans as superior to other animals legitimates killing and using them for human benefit. Anthropocentrism is thus inextricably linked to practices involving animal death, such as eating other animals. While human

exceptionalism is increasingly challenged in the life sciences as well as in moral and political philosophy, most societies still heavily rely on killing other animals, economically and culturally.

Animal rights and animal liberation theorists usually oppose these practices by arguing that other animals are similar to humans in morally relevant respects. They refer to sentience, or capacities that resemble human cognition or rationality, in order to argue for extending moral and political considerations, or rights, to other animals. While few theorists in these fields would defend the Heideggerian standpoint that other animals cannot die, many do see epistemic and normative differences between human and nonhuman animal death (Višak and Garner), often referring to cognitive differences (see Singer, in Višak and Garner 229-236, see Višak for a critique) to argue that their deaths count less than human deaths. This is not simply an empirical question, because this line of thought follows the logic of an anthropocentric framework and sees the human as a standard against which we should measure other animals (Wolfe). Using human standards to assess the harm of death for other animals obscures their ways of expressing themselves. It also refers to an idealized view of the human, as having privileged access to a universal truth (Oliver 282-287), which is presented as neutral but in fact follows from unequal power relations (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*). Animals – of the nonhuman and human kind – are not one group: there are many differences between individuals, species, and social groups, and some nonhuman animals are much closer to human animals, in terms of capacities, emotions, cognition and relations, than others (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*). It is furthermore problematic to state, as Heidegger did, that humans can completely understand themselves as beings towards death, both with regard to whether humans actually understand their own being in the world, and with regard to whether they fully grasp the meaning of death.

Many current practices involve serious animal suffering and an appeal to nonhuman animal sentience is enough to strongly condemn those. Rights are strong tools for establishing a better position for nonhuman animals, and they are important to strive towards, because they could greatly improve the lives of the billions of nonhuman animals who are currently used by humans for human benefit.³ There are also, however, situations concerning nonhuman animal death in which rights are not enough, and where taking their agency into account is important

for normative and epistemic reasons. This leads us to the question of nonhuman animal euthanasia. In certain circumstances death may be the best option for nonhuman animals – just as with humans – and humans can help other animals die. Other animals have their own unique perspectives on and experiences of their lives, and these should be taken into account in euthanasia procedures. This is necessary in order to take individual animals seriously as subjects and not repeat anthropocentric assumptions and practices. In the next section I explore this further by comparing nonhuman and human animal euthanasia in the Netherlands.

Comparing Human and Nonhuman Animal Euthanasia

In the Netherlands, as well as in Belgium and Luxembourg, human euthanasia is legal. ‘Euthanasia’ refers to a self-chosen death, either indirectly, by ending life-prolonging therapy, or directly, by actively ending someone’s life. In the latter case there is a difference between assisted suicide, in which a doctor gives a patient medication with which to end life (a practice that is also legal in certain other European countries), and cases in which a doctor ends someone’s life for them. The latter practice is often what is meant by euthanasia, and here I will focus on these cases. The criterion for euthanasia is *ondraaglijk en uitzichtloos lijden*, which roughly translates as ‘hopeless and unbearable suffering’. This can apply to both physical and mental illnesses. There are fixed procedures that need to be followed: cases for example always have to be assessed and approved by two doctors, one of which has no prior relation to the patient, and there should be no other solution possible.⁴

Euthanasia is accepted as a practice by 92% of Dutch citizens (*Trouw*). The majority of humans who choose euthanasia are cancer patients in the final stages of their disease and there is no public debate about this group. There are however cases that are disputed, both by doctors and the general public. I will here focus on two of these, concerning dementia and mental illnesses.⁵ Usually, in the case of dementia, patients in the early stages of the disease sign an *euthanasieverklaring*, a declaration stating that they want euthanasia when they reach a certain stage of the disease. The problem here is that when they get to that stage, they can no longer express their desire to die clearly – which is one of the prerequisites for the procedure to be

completed legally – and it also sometimes happens that they do not want to die anymore. With mental illness the process is similar to that with physical illnesses, but the issue here is often the difficulty of finding two doctors who both believe that the situation has no prospect of improving. In the case of depression for example, a desire to die might be considered to be a symptom of the disease, and often doctors will want the patient to try a new therapy or medication.

Choosing death may seem straightforward in many cases, and the procedures surrounding it may seem clear. The reality behind these procedures is however often quite complicated. In the cases of mental illness and dementia especially, interpretation and knowledge of context are required. In order to assess whether the criteria for euthanasia are met, doctors need to know more about the patient than just their medical record: they need to know about their history, understand their modes of expression, compare interpretations of their wishes and behaviours with those of companions who know them well, and so on. These aspects are also important in thinking about nonhuman animal euthanasia.

Nonhuman animal euthanasia is a widespread and often unquestioned practice, whether it regards companion animals in households or shelters,⁶ farm animals, animals in laboratories, or stray animals. The word ‘euthanasia’ in the case of nonhuman animals is often simply used as a euphemism for killing (see also Pierce 476). It can, for example, refer to the killing of laboratory animals who have been made to suffer for human benefit, once they are considered of no use anymore, instead of offering them the possibility to be adopted or live out the rest of their lives in other ways. It can also refer to the killing of companion animals because humans cannot bear the costs, financial or emotional, of continued medical care. While death might save some of these nonhuman animals from more suffering, there are options available for others which may prolong and improve their lives. Thinking about nonhuman animal euthanasia therefore means first of all clarifying this concept, and not simply using it for all cases in which humans seek to eliminate nonhuman animal suffering through killing (Lorenzini).

In what follows I concentrate on the cases in which humans do not benefit economically or otherwise from the death of the nonhuman animals in question, and in which the human

caretakers – companions, vets, or others – genuinely believe euthanasia is the best option available for these animals. Examples would be a cat who suffers greatly from kidney failure and has, after intensive therapy, no prospect of improving, even though he might live for a few more months; or the case of a city pigeon who is hit by a car and who would otherwise inevitably die a slow death. These types of cases raise two interrelated sets of questions. The first set of questions regards whether humans have a right, or even a duty, to choose death for others when they suffer unbearably and have no prospect of improving. The second set of questions concentrates on how one should approach nonhuman animal euthanasia respectfully, in the current state of knowledge about nonhuman animal cognition, emotion, and cultures, and how nonhuman animal agency can be taken into account in the process.

Humans and other animals are entangled in many relations; some may involve dependence on each other. In current power structures, humans determine important aspects of the lives of many other animals. Domesticated nonhuman animals have been made dependent on humans, human infrastructure and activity determines the space to move for many individuals and communities, and so on. In certain cases, this can lead to duties of care, including duties of medical care (Donaldson and Kymlicka 123). While increasing the freedom of nonhuman animals – be it through reformulating relations, or through installing rights – is an important goal for those concerned about their fate, in the current anthropocentric circumstances humans sometimes need to take care of other animals and make decisions for them.⁷

This does not mean that humans should adopt a patronizing attitude. Other animals express themselves and influence humans' lives as well as vice versa, and humans need to recognize and foster animals' agency within relationships. In the case of euthanasia, this means taking them seriously as subjects with their own perspectives on life, and paying attention to their experience of the situation. Human procedures surrounding euthanasia can shed light on how to go about this. At first glance it may seem problematic to compare human and nonhuman euthanasia procedures. After all, it seems as if nonhuman animals cannot speak and make their wishes concerning their lives known. Even in the case of humans with dementia and mental illnesses, they have at some point clearly expressed their desire to die. Recent research on nonhuman animal languages and cultures shows however that other animals have complex and

nuanced ways of expressing themselves (Meijer). These need to be taken into account, in much the same way as in the human case. As we are only beginning to understand the depth of many nonhuman animal languages, currently more interpretation is required than when human language is used between humans in standard ways. In assessing nonhuman animals' wishes to die, humans should therefore be at least as careful as in human euthanasia procedures.

In human euthanasia procedures, many aspects are taken into account, concerning the physical and mental health of the patient, their age, medical prospects, possible alternatives and so on. There is no one formula: human individuals may respond to pain differently, have different attitudes towards life, and respond differently to medication. Patients and doctors discuss this over several meetings, in which the human patient is at the centre of attention. In the case of nonhuman animals it is usually a human – the vet, a human companion, or both – who decides what happens and why. In order to improve these procedures, humans need to first move from regarding the other animal as an object to seeing her as a subject, not just on the individual level, but also legally. The growing scientific understanding of other animals' cognitive, emotional and social capacities can inform further developing these interspecies procedures. Humans should also look for ways to interact with other animals differently, in order to actively search for the nonhuman animals' perspectives on the matters concerned (Meijer). In addition to medical knowledge of vets, individual knowledge of nonhuman animals, their histories and expressions, as members of a species and as singular individuals, should play a role. The temporal dimensions of these processes need to be taken into account: coming to a judgment might ask for multiple meetings. Different humans who stand in relation to the companion animal in question should be consulted, in order to avoid one-sided interpretations.

Understanding Other Animals

Improving euthanasia procedures to take better account of animals' perspectives and choices should involve communicating with other animals about their desire to die. This is not the same as speaking with humans about death, since humans and other animals lack a formal common language in which this concept can be expressed. Not using the word 'death', however, does not

mean that animals cannot communicate to humans the desire to end their pain – and perhaps, sometimes, to end their life. As noted earlier, nonhuman animals do experience death, lose others, and express their feelings about this. Humans might not know whether, or which, other animals comprehend their own finitude, but humans do not have all the answers either when it comes to death, or choosing death. Practices surrounding human euthanasia are often complicated too and involve more questions than answers. Furthermore, the term ‘euthanasia’ has different meanings in different cultures – the Dutch attitude towards human euthanasia has been criticized in many other countries, while for those living in The Netherlands the practice is fairly uncontested in most cases.

In order to further develop methods of discussing death with other animals, it is important to learn more about their languages, cultures, and relations with members of their own and other species. Other animals are often stereotyped as silent, because they do not speak in human words, even though they communicate in complex and nuanced ways amongst themselves, and with significant humans in their lives (Meijer 78-80). Between dogs and humans, words, sounds, smells, chemicals, glances, movements, gestures, developing common habits, playing, and other means of communication can for example play a role (Meijer 79). Further investigating nonhuman animal languages, and agency in species-specific and interspecies relations, would improve human understanding of them and make possible new forms of interaction.

Knowing other animals is often considered to be fundamentally different from knowing humans. Because humans use human language, it is possible to gain insight into their minds, it is thought; other animals lack human language and thus this option is not open in human encounters with them. As discussed above, other animals have their own languages and can communicate with humans, but the problem runs deeper than this. Scepticism towards nonhuman animal minds reflects cultural values (Brooks Pribac 78-83, Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*), and, more importantly, it is not how intersubjectivity works. In a critique of scepticism about other human minds, Wittgenstein puts this as follows: ‘My attitude toward him is an attitude towards a soul: I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul’ (*Philosophical Investigations*, 178). In everyday encounters, humans, and other animals, approach others as subjects. That

they are subjects is one of the certainties that cannot be proven, but that are needed to acquire knowledge (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*), and more fundamentally: to simply live. Seeing others as subjects, and not as machines or objects, enables one to get to know them, and not the other way around. In the case of nonhuman animals this means encountering them as individuals who engage with others in meaningful ways and shape common worlds with them, instead of as beings who are stuck in their species-specific behaviors.⁸

An example of this approach can be found in the work of ethologist Barbara Smuts, who describes how she became attuned to baboons and dogs by living and moving with them, and how their embodied interaction allowed new, common, worlds to come into being (Smuts, see also Meijer 83-87). Paying attention to nonhuman animals in this way can offer humans a starting point for gaining a better understanding of their views on questions of life, and death.

The Good Life, The Good Death

The question of nonhuman animal death is inextricably linked to the question of how to live well with other animals. The conclusion of this paper therefore investigates how humans can develop new practices surrounding death with other animals. Before I turn to this, I draw some general conclusions with regard to nonhuman animal euthanasia.

The word ‘euthanasia’ is currently used as euphemism for many practices in which other animals are killed, and because this word is used to make their deaths seem beneficial, it functions to obscure, or even legitimate, the violence behind it. Using the right word for these acts, which is often ‘killing’, is important in challenging this. There are however cases in which other animals might want to end their pain, or perhaps even die, and where using the word euthanasia is appropriate. Even in this context, there are significant differences between human and nonhuman animal euthanasia. In making the decision to end their lives, nonhuman animals are often treated as mute, and it is standard practice for humans to choose death for them, without many legal regulations, whereas human euthanasia follows strict procedures, in which the subject concerned decides what happens. In order to do justice to nonhuman animals,

humans should not only amend legal regulations, but also further develop the procedures surrounding nonhuman animal euthanasia together with other animals.

There are many different ways of dealing with death; finding out more about how other human and nonhuman communities, and nonhuman animals in shared interspecies communities, relate to death does not impoverish the concept, but instead makes it richer. In order to further find out more about how other animals understand and experience death, humans need to attend to them and create spaces for them to act in ways they think suitable. Human views of other animals are currently often formed by prejudices that follow from centuries of oppression, and many practices are aimed at oppressing them; we do not know how this would evolve once they are provided with the options to expand their choices, both with regard to how they express themselves, and how they want to relate to humans.

Improving procedures regarding nonhuman animal euthanasia is also interconnected with improving interspecies relations on a societal level. Thinking about euthanasia, or striving to improve euthanasia legislation concerning companion animals, might seem frivolous in a world in which many nonhuman animals are killed and made to suffer daily for human interests. Bringing to light nonhuman animal agency and subjectivity in different fields can however help to change views about the place that nonhuman animals have in communities, and cultural practices are interconnected with political structures. Furthermore, arguing that nonhuman animal death is a topic worth discussing, and a matter in which other animals have their own standpoints, is overdue in a world that systematically disregards their lives and perspectives.

It is important to remember that humans are also animals. Death separates us from others, human and nonhuman, at least physically, but it also connects us to them, because as animals we all share the fate that we will die at some point. According to Derrida (*The Beast and the Sovereign vol. I and II*), death overrides Heidegger's view of human sovereignty because animals, human or nonhuman, do not have to be sovereign to be able to die: death happens to them. It challenges the distinction between active and passive, and between human and animal. While some animals can choose death, no animal can choose not to die. We do not know when we will die, or often how, but that we will die is certain – all animals are bodies, we are all

vulnerable. Humans and other social animals also have in common that they love and lose others (Bekoff; King), of their own and other species – species is not the defining characteristic in building common worlds and being with others (Derrida, Meijer, Smuts). Sharing one’s life with others of different species allows them to shape your world, as you shape theirs. When our loved ones die, our worlds are broken. Thinking about the death of the animals close to us should start there, in the shared vulnerability that characterizes us, and the relationships that connect us.

New Directions

There are several ways in which interspecies procedures surrounding nonhuman animal euthanasia can be improved. Legal scholars and political philosophers can further explore how legislation concerning human euthanasia compares to nonhuman animal euthanasia. Existing legislation should be changed to safeguard nonhuman animal interests, and to take into account their unique ways of being and knowing the world. New empirical studies about nonhuman animal grief and mourning (such as Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*; King; Pierce), language (Meijer) and cultures (Donaldson and Kymlicka; Smuts), can improve human understanding of other animals and offer starting points for acting differently.

In the context of nonhuman animal euthanasia, it is not only relevant to explore connections with ideas about human euthanasia; it is also imperative to deal differently with nonhuman animal suffering. Nonhuman animals are not stuck in the present, as was long thought (Pierce 464) and in many cases they might benefit from prolonged life. Palliative care, and nonhuman animal medicines more generally, need to be further developed, and killing practices as well (Pierce 475).⁹ Vets should be trained in ethics, in order to make more balanced decisions.

Humans can develop new ways of living with other animals (Donaldson, Smuts), focused on enlarging nonhuman animals’ freedom and fostering their agency, for example in farm sanctuaries, wildlife rehabilitation centres, and households. In these spaces, new interspecies practices can be developed with regard to nonhuman animal death. Euthanasia is of

course only one aspect of nonhuman animal death. Allowing other animals to experience the death of their companions, by being present when the companion dies, is for example also important. This can help them understand the situation, and perhaps also allows an opportunity to say goodbye, and to begin grieving. Taking nonhuman animal grief and mourning seriously is a necessary condition for being able to offer them comfort, which, as the case of Harper and Kohl shows, may not always be possible. Finally, new interspecies rituals could be developed together with other animals, to accompany them in their last days.

Notes

¹ See also Bekoff, 'Did a Female Burro Commit Suicide? Some Compelling Stories Suggest Animals Do Take Their Own Lives.'

² Brooks Pribac mentions two examples: senicide and 'delayed personhood' (81). Senicide, described as 'mercy killing', refers to the killing of elderly people by their children when they feel that they cannot look after them properly, or that caring for them would endanger their own and their children's survival. Delayed personhood is found in societies with high infant mortality and refers to the practice of considering infants not fully human due to the uncertainty of their survival. This leads to emotional distancing, and sometimes even delaying naming the child for a certain period of time.

³ Because rights are often modeled on the human, animal advocates, activists, and philosophers should also investigate the ways in which they might perpetuate anthropocentrism and challenge the underlying mechanisms of exclusion.

⁴ There are six requirements that need to be followed in order for the procedure to be legal. 1. The doctor has to be convinced that the request for euthanasia was voluntary and informed. 2. The patient's suffering is unbearable and has no prospect of improving. 3. The doctor has informed the patient about her situation and prospects. 4. Both the doctor and patient reached the conclusion that there is no other solution possible. 5. The doctor consulted at least one other doctor, who also saw the patient and had no prior relation to the patient. This second doctor provided a written statement, based on the due diligence guidelines. 6. The euthanasia is performed in accordance with medical guidelines.

⁵ There are other examples, such as very old people who feel they have lived a full life and do not wish to continue it, but the problem there is not so much of interpretation and as with accepting the reasons for someone's desire to end their life. Another example concerns children. Children over 12 years old can opt for euthanasia, if they can show they understand what it entails and express their wish coherently (doctors often mention children being wise beyond their years). While there is some debate about this group, the phenomenon fortunately is rare.

⁶ For an analysis of killing nonhuman animals in shelters, see Palmer.

⁷ It is important to recognize that humans also live in webs of relations, and human euthanasia involves dependence on others on a very fundamental level – someone helps you die.

⁸ See also Aaltola (2013) on empathy and intersubjectivity.

⁹ Without using and killing other nonhuman animals, for ethical reasons.

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