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Killing out of Convenience is Not Euthanasia

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Summary

This paper discusses why the term 'euthanasia' and its derivatives are used incorrectly in almost all instances, whether in general use, the popular press or in scientific publications. This continued and euphemistic misuse of the term represents dishonesty and a denial of the gravity of what is being done under the guise of an 'easy death'.

Keywords: animal overpopulation, animal welfare, easy death, euphemisms, euthanasia, killing

The term “euthanasia” means that an individual is being killed by another, but solely with the interests of the individual dying in mind. Of necessity, this means that the individual dying would benefit from death by ending a situation that is causing intractable suffering, whether mental or physical. Ideally, the individual would be able to indicate that he or she prefers death to continued life. In some situations, particularly in veterinary medicine or when dealing with non-human animals in general, this may not be feasible because of an inability to communicate with the individual. In these situations, it becomes particularly important that the person ending life must be clear on her or his motives which must derive only from a sincere belief that ending the life is in the best interests of that individual at that moment and without regard for personal or societal issues. Using a defence that one is somehow preventing *future* suffering would be patently absurd and could justify killing any individual, whether human or non-human, at any time.

In addition to considering the interests of the individual being killed, euthanasia also demands that the method of death be as quick, painless and stress-free as humanly possible, as implied in its derivation (the Greek word euthanatos, which means 'easy death'²). Any method that results in more than momentary and mild pain, creates an atmosphere of extreme anxiety or otherwise impacts negatively on the individual cannot logically be considered euthanasia.

One of the most abused uses of the term euthanasia is when it is used to characterise the killing of unwanted cats, dogs and others as a means of dealing with “overpopulation” of these individuals. In the vast majority of cases, the killing of those individuals fails to meet the most important test of the definition of euthanasia: best interests of the individual. Even if the dog, for example, is handled gently and a method such as an intravenous overdose of a barbiturate is used skillfully, this does not qualify as euthanasia. Even if the dog is considered “not adoptable” for reasons of aggression, for example, this still does not qualify as euthanasia. One could not argue coherently that this particular dog would choose death over life. If one does not believe this, imagine killing a healthy human being, even one who is ostracised by others due to obnoxious behaviour, in such a manner that he or she is unaware of impending death and feels no pain when it occurs. No rational person could consider this to be other than murder, certainly not euthanasia. Taking the lives of non-human animals for reasons of benefit to society or because funds are not available to provide care is not euthanasia, no matter how carefully and compassionately it is done nor how fervently we wish it to be the case. It is killing, regardless of the rationalisations and justifications underlying it.

Equally irrational is when researchers kill their non-human subjects under the guise of “euthanasia”.³ They often use the term “humane euthanasia”,⁴ a redundancy apparently aimed at either assuaging their own consciences or those of the public. But, even if the researchers are killing the individuals for “humane” reasons, such as a “humane endpoint” or unexpected complications, *this is not logically “euthanasia”*. If you are the reason the individual is suffering or no longer wants to live, you cannot claim to be “humane” in ending that individual’s life. Consider an absurd situation in which human ‘A’ severely traumatises human ‘B’ so that ‘B’ is in intractable pain and suffering greatly. ‘A’ cannot then kill ‘B’ and claim that he was performing “euthanasia”.

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2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/euthanasia>

3 A few 2024 examples of inappropriate use of ‘euthanasia’: [Bell et al 2024](#); [Bohler et al 2024](#); [Carroll et al 2024](#); [Daadi et al 2024](#); [Evans et al 2024](#); [Manzanera Esteve et al 2024](#); [Rimkute et al 2024](#); [Singh et al 2024](#); [Woolsey et al 2024](#)

4 A few 2024 examples of ‘humane euthanasia’ use: [Bell et al 2024](#); [Carroll et al 2024](#); [Woolsey et al 2024](#)

This is not a pedantic issue. The public recognise the term euthanasia and believe it to mean a humane death, but fail to appreciate the nuances involved and its almost universal incorrect use. They should be told the truth about the situation, that the term is almost always used to cover up convenience *killing* or purposeful killing that has nothing to do with welfare. Those in the scientific community need to be honest about what they are doing. Discussions about the morality of purposefully killing someone, in this case a non-human animal, when it is not in their interests, cannot proceed rationally if people hide behind a euphemistic term that is being used incorrectly.

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