

The value of death for animals: an overview

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1. Introduction¹

This chapter reviews issues concerning the value of death for nonhuman animals, specifically in shelters. Prominent views in animal ethics argue that, for many sentient animals at least, killing is morally wrong, either because they have an inherent right not to be killed (Regan, 1983) or, to some extent, because they have some future-directed desires (Singer, 2011²). Utilitarians also argue that whatever has intrinsic value—pleasure, preference-satisfaction, the mere existence of consciousness—death is bad, and killing wrong, the extent that it makes the world a worse place (Jamieson, 1984; Norcross, 2013; Lazari-Radek and Singer, 2014). While this chapter will deal with the ethics of euthanasia in its last section, other chapters in this volume address the ethics of *killing*. Our focus here is on the *value* and *harm* of death.³

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, an estimated 12-20 million dogs and cats were killed every year in the United States. The rate has only recently gone down to 3-4 million according to the Humane Society of the United States in 2014 (Kasperbauer and Sandøe, 2016, p. 28). Some of these animals are killed because they are ill or injured, many others because they are “unwanted.” Concurrently, so-called “no-kill” shelters,

¹ Many thanks to Bob Fischer, Valéry Giroux, Angie Pepper, Duncan Purves, and Kristin Voigt for their input.

² In the first (1979) and second (1993) editions of *Practical Ethics*, Singer endorsed different explanations of the wrongness of killing within a preference-based axiology. In subsequent work with Katarzyna Lazari-Radek, they endorse hedonism, where the disvalue of death is reducible to the net amount of pleasant experiences it subtracts from the world (Lazari-Radek and Singer, 2014).

³ See Jaquet’s and Pepper’s contributions in this volume.

where 90 percent or more animals are not killed, have been on the rise (the 10 remaining percent are either too unhealthy to survive or too aggressive to safely adopt out) (Abrell, 2021, p. 36).

What makes an animal's life worth or no longer worth living? What, if anything, makes death bad for them? Answering the first question turns on more than an animal's current health. Sociologists Arluke and Sanders write of shelter workers' seeing "death as the alleviation of suffering":

This was easy to do with animals that were very sick or old—known as "automatic kills"—but it was much harder to see suffering in "healthy and happy" animals. They, too, had to be seen as having lives not worth living. Workers were aware that the breadth of their definition of suffering made euthanasia easier for them. One worker acknowledged, "Sometimes you want to find any reason [to euthanize], like it has a runny nose," because killing was harder to do without a reason. ... [I]t was thought better to euthanize healthy strays than to let them "suffer" on the streets. ... Once in the shelter, healthy strays, along with abandoned and surrendered animals, were also thought better dead than "fostered out."

(Arluke and Sanders, 1996, pp. 91-92)⁴

Many "open admission" shelters kill animals due to resource or space limitations, and because they know many animals who cannot be rehomed would live miserable lives on the street. Underpinning the divide between shelters is a disagreement on the above two questions and how they inform the ethics of killing. Most animals who die in North American shelters are in relatively good health. Yet we usually define *euthanasia* as the act of painlessly killing an animal to put them out of their misery. As Kasperbauer and

⁴ Based on Arluke's ethnographic research in a "kill-shelter" in a large metropolitan area in the US.

Sandøe (2016, p. 21) note, the fact that professional guidelines usually abide by this definition suggests that euthanasia is seen as a welfare issue, even though killing is often allowed on convenience grounds (Yeates and Main, 2011). The American Veterinary Medical Association's guidelines state that it should be pursued "when death is a welcome event and continued existence is not an attractive option for the animal as perceived by the owner and veterinarians" (AVMA, 2013, p. 7; Kasperbauer and Sandøe, 2016, p. 21). In other words, euthanasia is to be done *in the interests of the animal*. In such guidelines, welfare is usually defined by reference to experiences, following the hedonistic conception of welfare found in the Brambell Report (1965). When future life would involve too much (i.e., "prolonged and unrelenting") suffering, euthanasia is seen as compassionate (AVMA 2013, p. 9). It is also PETA's (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) position regarding euthanasia (Abrell, 2021, p. 88). Typically, an animal's life is no longer worth living, according to such guidelines, when they are experiencing severe pain or other states that have no easy remedy, or suffering from illness or injury that guarantees future suffering not offset by other aspects of well-being (Kasperbauer and Sandøe, 2016, p. 22). This chapter does not assume any specific conception of welfare. In contrast to the Brambell Report's narrow focus on negative mental states, animal well-being will hereafter refer to the full range of animal interests, including positive well-being.

Here's a simple thought. Death is bad.⁵ In fact, it's often thought to be the worst thing that can happen to anybody—with exceptions: we sometimes hear about 'fates worse than death'. But in what sense is it bad? Under what circumstances? There are many questions that concern human beings as well as other animals, such as the "timing

⁵ Epicurus famously wrote: "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more." (Epicurus, 1940, p. 30-31) Because Epicurean challenges are about our attitudes toward death (fear and anxiety), which other animals probably lack, we will set them aside.

problem" (if death harms, when does the harm occur?); the Lucretian "late-birth" asymmetry (if premature death is bad, why isn't being born later than one could have been equally bad; if it isn't, then why think death is bad for us?); and Epicurus's well-known puzzle (no one ever experiences the harm of death while they exist).⁶ More relevant to our purposes are questions that receive *different* answers when applied to humans and other animals. In this chapter, I ask whether death is bad for shelter animals and if it is, how bad it can be. Sections 2-4 introduce three possible kinds of answer to these questions: death as a deprivation, death as thwarting desires, and death as interrupting a narrative. As we'll see, the Deprivation view comes out best against competing views. The Deprivation view retains its appeal despite objections and has many virtues. One is that it nicely accounts for the judgment that death is bad for animals too. Another is that it makes sense of whether and when it is better for some animals in shelters to be killed than allowed to suffer (in shelters, on the street or in the wild). Section 5 thus turns to the idea that death can be good for some shelter animals and asks how the decisions about killing individual animals should be made.

2. Deprivation

2.1. Life Comparative Account

A standard response to the Epicurean puzzle, that death is nothing to us, argues that death is bad for a person insofar as it deprives them of what would have been good for them had they continued to live. This response does not presuppose that the subject experiences the harm.⁷ According to Deprivationism, death is bad because of what it takes from the one who dies or prevents them from having (Feldman, 1991; Bradley,

⁶ See Fischer (2020) for an excellent review and critical discussion.

⁷ Accepting Deprivationism leads into another challenge, set forth by the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius in his poem, *De Rerum Natura*, according to which prenatal existence and posthumous existence are "mirror images" of each other and call for symmetric attitudes. For the same reasons as above, we can set it aside. See Fischer (2020) for critical discussion.

2009; 2016; Broome, 2013; Kagan, 2012; Nagel, 1979; Marquis, 1989). This view has been applied to animals by several authors (e.g., Bradley, 2009; 2016; Cholbi 2017; DeGrazia, 1996; 2016; Harman, 2011; Nussbaum, 2006; Overall 2017; Regan, 1983).⁸ The basic argument is summed up by Ben Bradley (2016, p. 51-52) as follows:

1. Death is bad for an individual if and only if it makes that individual's lifetime well-being level lower than it would otherwise have been.
2. Death sometimes makes an animal's lifetime well-being level lower than it would have been.
3. Death, therefore, is sometimes bad for an animal.

Lifetime well-being accounts for the value for you of your whole life.

Deprivationism, sometimes called the Life Comparative Account, is stated in premise 1. Those who oppose this argument reject premise 1 in favor of a different criterion or premise 2 by denying that animals have lifetime well-being. We'll address the former strategy in Section 3; the latter in Section 4.

Deprivationism is *comparative*: "the overall value of an event for a person is equal to the difference between the value of her actual life and the value of the life she would have had if the event had not happened" (Bradley, 2009, p. 113). Death is bad if and insofar as it deprives one of a valuable future, so, assuming a future worth living, death is worse the earlier it comes. Bradley's view is hedonist—having pleasurable experiences is what makes life good—but other theories of value and wellbeing are compatible with Deprivationism—desires and psychological sophistication, meaning and narrativity, if they contribute to well-being, also contribute to the badness of death, as we'll see. Deprivationism as such is neutral with respect to what determines well-being.

Deprivationism explains why it can be permissible to cause animals pain to save them from life-threatening injuries or illnesses, as with "a young cat that could lead a

⁸ On some version of the view, it can be bad *that* a conscious animal dies (impersonally or "for the world"), yet bad *to* self-conscious animals only (Norcross 2013).

long happy life if it is given serious surgery that would give it quite a bit of pain (even with painkillers) for a few days, followed by months of serious discomfort” (Harman, 2011, p. 732). In this case, it is permissible to perform the serious and painful surgery on the animal because the goods in their life after surgery outweigh the badness of the procedure itself. The cat’s death would be bad insofar as it would deprive the cat of a such goods.

Deprivationism explains why death can be bad for cats and dogs, but it doesn’t straightforwardly explain why death is worse for *persons*—the technical philosophical term for a being who is self-aware, rational, and autonomous. In this instance, persons are normally capable of forward-looking thoughts, desires, and preferences; they have a conception of their own existence over time.⁹ Some authors, such as DeGrazia (2016), accept Deprivationism for the general badness of premature death for sentient creatures, but appeal to further theoretical principles to explain why death is typically worse for persons, provided by the following account.

2.2. Time-Relative Interests

According to Jeff McMahan’s (2002; 2016) Time-Relative Interest Account (TRIA),¹⁰ the badness of death depends on two factors:

- i. the value of the life that the individual would have had, had they not died when they did;
- ii. the extent to which they are psychologically related to their possible future life at that time.

The TRIA discounts the harm of death, at the time of death, for weaker degrees of psychological connections to one’s future self. Assuming the badness of deprivation,

⁹ Deprivationism combined with an objective-list or perfectionist theory of well-being can account for this judgment, if greater well-being involves goods such as knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, and virtue, and persons’ lives contain more of such goods than animals’ lives.

¹⁰ McMahan also defends a TRIA of the *wrongness of killing*, which depends on but is not equivalent to the TRIA of the *badness of death*.

“how great a misfortune an individual suffers in dying varies with the quality and quantity of the life he would otherwise have had. Because animals lose less, their deaths are usually less bad” (McMahan, 2016, p. 70). Unmodified Deprivationism implies “that the worst death that an individual can suffer is immediately after beginning to exist.” But this is implausible. According to the TRIA, a one-month-old human has a weaker interest in continuing to life than a five-year-old, who in turn has a weaker interest than a twenty-year-old. Even though the younger human has more to lose in quantity and maybe quality of life, what they lose must be discounted for weaker prudential relations across their different ‘selves’ or life-stages.¹¹ The badness of death thus changes over time:

as we mature psychologically, we gradually become both more substantial as possible subjects of misfortune and more closely psychologically connected to ourselves as we will later be, if death does not intervene ... even though the amount of good life we have in prospect is steadily diminishing.

(McMahan, 2016, p. 71)

Analogous reasoning applies to differences *between* species:

Like ourselves in the earliest moments of our lives, most animals are, throughout their lives, largely psychologically unconnected to themselves in the future. They live mostly in the present. So not only is the life they lose through death inferior in quality and quantity, but they are also only weakly related to their possible future life in the ways that matter.

(ibid.)

¹¹ By ‘prudential’ philosophers mean, roughly, what is in a being’s own interest, or what it is rational to care about for the being’s own sake.

Because the badness of *suffering* is not relative to such connections, it may be worse for an animal, at a time, to suffer than die. This implies that sometimes it may not be in an animal's best interest to undergo painful surgery to prevent future suffering or death. But mildly painful surgeries for the sake of near-term well-being are permissible (compare *Suffering Now* and *Suffering Later*, McMahan, 2016, pp. 71-72). Section 5 returns to these questions.

These implications may seem counterintuitive. One may think that, whether living longer would be good for a cat should not depend on how strongly connected they are to their far future but simply how good their future life can be. Imagine animals whose current interests involve only things and events within the next five years; nothing that happens beyond that is "in their interest" because it is too far removed from them, psychologically speaking. Elizabeth Harman (2011) argues that the TRIA implies that we should not perform painful life-saving surgery on an animal to prevent harm that would occur more than five years later, even if it would enable them to experience many more pleasant years. That's because, according to the TRIA, such animals lack a *present* interest in being alive in six years. The TRIA cannot accommodate our intuition that it would be better for them to go on living.¹² The TRIA thus refines Deprivationism to take into account psychology, not just the amount of good in a future life, but it has its own troublesome implications. As we'll see, all theories come at a cost, especially Deprivationism's main rival, desire-based views.

¹² McMahan (2016) argues that such animals' time-relative interests, at the time of surgery, are only comparatively weak, not nonexistent. If surgery involves significant suffering, it may not be good for them to receive treatment. But we may still consider an animal's *future* interests in determining what is best for them, such as whether a shelter animal will benefit in a few years from undergoing surgery now. By the same token, if an animal is healthy now but will suffer greatly in the future (say, because they cannot be rehomed), and we may best prevent future suffering now by ending their life (see Section 5).

3. Desires

According to desire-based views, death is bad if and only if it frustrates certain *current* interests, whereas Deprivationism also counts the satisfaction of *future* (as-yet unformed) interests as relevant to the loss of good. Some desire-based views have trouble accounting for the badness of death for animals who lack future-directed desires or are not self-conscious (Jamieson, 1983; Singer, 2011). Accordingly, they are more permissive with respect to killing animals, whether they are healthy or not, but even more so for animals whose future life involves significant suffering.

3.1. Categorical desires

The view that some *sophisticated* form of desire explains the badness of death has been defended by Christopher Belshaw (2013; 2015; 2016).¹³ The value of death, he argues, is not just a function of the value of the life lost and how early it occurs. A desire to continue to live is necessary for death's badness.

Belshaw draws on a distinction between *categorical* and *conditional* desires, made by Bernard Williams (1973) in his classic article on immortality. Both are future-directed desires. Conditional desires are those we want satisfied *on the condition that we will be alive*; categorical desires are those we have regardless and which *give us a reason to go on living* (Williams, 1973, p. 85). For example, one typically will not want to undergo painful live-saving surgery just to get another cup of coffee tomorrow—I'd be happy to get another cup of coffee tomorrow, if I'm still alive, but it's not what gives me a reason to live. On the other hand, one may want to undergo surgery to fulfill the project of completing a novel or seeing one's children grow up—these give me a reason to live. The "salient difference" between such desires, writes Belshaw, "lies not in the

¹³ Also see Cigman (1981) (categorical desires underpin the right to life) and Wolf (1997) (categorical desires are necessary for meaning in life). Others deny that (many or most) animals have an interest in or right to life because they lack concepts or self-consciousness (Frey, 1980; Tooley, 1984; Singer 2011; Varner, 2012).

objects themselves, but in our attitudes toward them.” (2013, p. 275) We can imagine a conditional desire to complete a novel or, perhaps less plausibly, a categorical desire for the best cup of coffee. What matters is that we have a categorical desire for something if that thing gives us reason to go on living. These attitudes depend on cognitive capacities that most animals presumably lack—e.g., an understanding of the difference between life and death (Cigman, 1981, pp. 58-59) or a sense of time and biography-relevant concepts (Varner, 2012). As a result, most animals cannot take something that is valuable to them and see that value as giving them a reason to keep on living. They lack categorical desires, according to Belshaw.

In fact, Belshaw’s view states two necessary conditions for death’s badness: a desire to live and realistic expectations of a future life worth living. Quality of life per se doesn’t ground an interest in living; desiring to live on might be unrealistic or delusional (2013, p. 292). Belshaw’s view entails that, even though they’ll have categorical desires in the future, death is not bad for babies, although it may be wrong to kill them, for others and because the wrongness of killing depends on further factors (2013, p. 293) (it’s not bad either for fetuses, patients in permanent vegetative states, and late-stage Alzheimer’s patients; pp. 278-279). Another implication seems to be that, for a depressed person lacking categorical desires - desires that give reasons to go on living - death need not be so bad. Here Belshaw is more ambivalent, and his distinctions *ad hoc*. For instance, a teenager with only conditional desires still has an interest in living if she will likely develop categorical desires someday and her future life will be good (2013, pp. 280-281). Presumably, on a charitable reading, those desires would be hers because she already has the relevant psychology, unlike fetuses, infants, and cats, and we can predict with some confidence that she would develop them.

Such implications are unacceptable to many critics (DeGrazia, 1996, p. 237; McMahan, 2002, p. 182; Bradley, 2016, p. 57). Anyone who accepts such implications will not be troubled by the claim that death isn’t bad for animals. But even if one rejects

them, this might be for reasons that don't apply to other animals who, unlike children and teenagers, will never develop categorical desires.

So, why are categorical desires important? A simple thought is that they persist. Death does not frustrate conditional desires. When a desire is conditional on something that fails to obtain, it is neither satisfied nor frustrated, it is *cancelled* (McDaniel and Bradley, 2008). Say I'm on the road and want to get a cup of coffee *if* there's a good coffeeshop in the next town. As it happens, there are only grubby convenience stores. My desire for that cup of coffee is not frustrated but cancelled. On to the next town! If I die tomorrow, likewise my desire will only have been cancelled. A categorical desire, by contrast, is one that death does not cancel. My early death would frustrate, not cancel, my desire to see my daughters grow up. When such desires are combined with the potential good future, its frustration makes death bad. This is, it seems, why it would be bad for me to die now: I have reasons to go on living grounded in persisting desires that are not conditional. Thus, even if categorical desires are not sufficient for death's badness¹⁴ (*pace* Williams, 1973), they are necessary, according to Belshaw.

If Belshaw's view is correct, and only persons can want to live, death is not bad for "lower animals" such as "cows, rabbits, frogs, worms". Their deaths "can be bad for owners, viewers, bystanders, friends, relatives, and dependents ... Maybe it can be bad, in some sense, for the universe", but not *for the one who dies* (2013, p. 279). It is not bad in a way that we should, morally, care or worry about for those beings' sake. We should not "be exercised about [it], regret its occurrence, or make any sacrifices to prevent it" (p. 290). This has radical implications. Consider the following cases:

My cat will live for another three years, and good years, if I subject it to an extremely painful operation, with six months of bad side effects, right now. Many

¹⁴ Either because people may be wrong about death being bad for them even if they have categorical desires or because their reason to avoid death may not be overriding or fully coherent (Belshaw, 2013, p. 276).

people think that future pleasure cannot straightforwardly compensate for present pain in an animal [*sic*] life. (Belshaw, 2013, p. 288)

We're in a car crash together, both now unconscious. A doctor might well, and reasonably, decide it is worth giving me some painful operation to save my life, because, as he believes, I would want this. Ought he to do the same for Baby? I think we should look upon a baby here much as we'd look upon a cat, and be most concerned with its present pain. (Belshaw, 2013, p. 289)

In both cases, Belshaw suggests, the relevant interests are present interests in enjoying a positive balance of experiential welfare. If pain is bad for them, and they lack a desire to live, then it is better for them to die (which doesn't entail that it is right to kill them or let them die). Death not being bad and being often good for these animals implies that we may often (sometimes should) kill our companion animals as soon as their pain cannot be managed or wild animals whenever we get a chance, since the alternatives for them are worse (Belshaw, 2016, pp. 41-42). It also implies that we may kill happy animals for their meat (Belshaw 2015).

Let us now consider some potential objections to desire-based views.

3.2. The relevance of desires

Is a desire for *life itself* relevant to the badness of death? Many children or teenagers, because they haven't thought much about death or lack a robust conception of the difference between life and death, do not have desires for more life, but still have many desires that *presuppose* that they go on living (Bower and Fischer, 2018, p. 100). We may, with Bower and Fischer, decide to also call these categorical desires if, when "situated in appropriately complex mental lives" they give one reason to continue to live. The terminology isn't crucial, as long as we admit that some desires can give us reason

to live even though they are not, strictly speaking, categorical (for Belshaw the latter presuppose that one *wants to live* not just has desires that imply continuing to live). Do any animals possess future-directed desires in Bower and Fischer's sense?

Belshaw claims that we often misinterpret the meaning of animal behavior, as in claims such as: "horses do have desires, and it is apparent that they often act in order to continue living" (Bradley and McDaniel, 2013, p. 128). However, Bradley writes, "Those who are suspicious of the mental lives of cows should, if anything, be more suspicious that they have *conditional* desires than that they have *categorical* ones." (2016, pp. 54-55) For conditional desires do not appear to require less mental machinery. Granted, cows' future-directed desires may not extend very far, nor do they concern their life-as-a-whole. Even if their death was "typically *less* bad" than a human death, it would still be bad in frustrating current future-directed desires and preventing the formation and satisfaction of future preferences (Bradley, 2016, pp. 56-57). Belshaw contends that when animals like cows and foxes move to eat grass or escape a trap, they just want to eat the grass or to end the pain *now*. But, as Bower and Fischer argue, this hardly is a parsimonious theory:

If it strikes you as *prima facie* implausible that these animals have a concept of the future and their continued survival, it should similarly strike you as implausible that they have a concept of the present. It seems, rather, like we should say that the content of the desire just doesn't specify any time or range of time for its satisfaction—it's the tenseless desire for grass, not the tensed desire for grass *now*. (2018, p. 103)

Nothing bars such desires from "propelling" animals into the future. Moreover, we can look at which animals are capable of planning and anticipation. Bower and Fischer (2018, p. 104-105) cite reviews of evidence on fish (Brown, 2015), chicken (Marino, 2017), and pig cognition (Mendl et al., 2010). We can add some recent evidence on bovines

(Comstock, 2020; Marino and Allen, 2017; for broader reviews of “mental time travel”, see Mendl and Paul, 2008; and Roberts, 2012). While studies on cats and dogs are harder to come by, it would be surprising if they lived strictly in the present. For instance, researchers emphasize the role of smell in dogs’ perception of time (Horowitz, 2016) and have found evidence of deceptive-life behavior in dogs (Heberlein et al., 2017), which plausibly requires forward-thinking. The evidence that cats possess more than a rudimentary concept of time is anecdotal. However, their desires for companionship, comfort, play, hunting and exploration all require the persistence of elements of their environment, which fix the content and satisfaction conditions of some of their desires (see Bower and Fischer, 2018, p. 106-107). We may thus accept that psychology matters yet reject the thesis that *categorical* desires are necessary.

Consider again Jeff McMahan’s TRIA. McMahan objects to the Categorical Desires view that it can’t account for the badness of death for infants and animals (2002, p. 182), yet he also notes that “desires do figure in several ways in the full explanation” of the badness of death, by providing psychological connections across time, constituting “long-range ambitions, plans, goals, and projects” and thereby making one’s life more “richly unified”. Categorical desires, in particular, can express “an individual’s personal values” and contribute to narrative unity. (ibid.) But note that even this admission rests on the premise that desires matter because of their *contribution to goods* of which death deprives the dead. Desires just affect the discounting rate we should apply to the loss of future goods at the time of death. Simply put, things we care about are things we can have a stronger interest in having, which doesn’t mean things we do not care about are not things we have an interest in having.

Psychology matters, which is why McMahan introduces further factors determining death’s badness. The disvalue of deprivation (factor 1) must be discounted for the absence of subsequent factors (p. 184; pp. 197-198):

1. The amount of good that is lost.

2. The strength of the prudential unity relations between the individual at the time of death and their future self when the future goods would have occurred.
3. How well the individual has fared before death in relation to the norm for individuals with psychological capacities comparable to their own.
4. Narrative structure—how unified the individual’s life is and how the future life they lost would have shaped the narrative.
5. Invested efforts in one’s own future and whether death renders them retroactively futile or pointless.
6. Whether the individual’s character or actions made them “deserving” of the goods they lost (i.e., it’s worse to lose goods you’ve rightly earned than ones you got through a stroke of luck).
7. Whether the individual desired or valued the goods they lost at the time of death.

In all these possible ways, animals who are not persons have less to lose. For example, “most animals lack the capacity for many of the forms of experience and action that give the lives of persons their special richness and meaning” (p. 195). Their relationship to time also affects the quality of their experience: “Each day is merely more of the same. ... There is no scope for tragedy—for hopes passing unrealized, projects unwillingly aborted, mistakes or misunderstandings left uncorrected, or apologies left unmade.” (p. 197) Accordingly, premature death is less of a harm for cats and dogs than it is for persons losing a proportionally comparable amount of future goods (i.e., whose death is similarly premature relative to the relevant life expectancy benchmark). The TRIA, unlike Belshaw’s view, accounts for the badness of animal death, but like Belshaw’s view, it purports to explain the special badness of persons’ death. Even so, deprivation remains decisive.

In sum, desire-based views make controversial theoretical and empirical assumptions. They also presuppose a desire-based theory of value and well-being, unlike Deprivationism, which is neutral. Even if some future-directed desires are relevant

to the badness of death, death can still be bad for animals. Deprivationism thus comes out ahead. Its initial appeal in solving Epicurean puzzles persists after closer examination of its main rival. However, even granting Deprivationism, we might object that death isn't very bad for animals because there is something that death can ruin for us but not for animals: a story.

4. Narratives

Diachronic unity, or integration within a life, can affect the badness of death. Typically, a person's life can form a meaningful whole, exhibiting some structure and direction. For infants and fetuses, "[d]eath does not spoil a good story for the simple reason that the story has hardly begun" (McMahan, 2002, p. 176). The importance of narratives to identity and well-being has been emphasized by many authors (DeGrazia, 2005; Lindemann, 2013; Schechtman, 1996; Varner, 2012).

In an influential but controversial paper, David Velleman (1991) rejects the premise that animals can have lifetime well-being, without rejecting Deprivationism. Animals cannot accumulate well-being or care about their life story, because they have no conception of themselves over time. Hence, he argues, nothing can detract from their lifetime well-being. If death is bad because it detracts from lifetime well-being, then it cannot be bad for animals.

Velleman distinguishes between *momentary* well-being (at a time) and *diachronic* well-being (over time). Diachronic well-being is determined at least partly by facts about narrative structure: the fate of projects and whether early efforts paid off, over and above facts about momentary well-being at particular moments of one's life. A life can even be better with less of the latter if a successful or redeeming narrative contributes to lifetime well-being. Further, for something to be intrinsically good for one, one must be capable of caring about it. Call it, following Bradley, the "capacity to care condition" (2016, p. 61). Cows have only momentary well-being. Since they lack the capacity to care

about how their lives as a whole go, they cannot have lifetime well-being, or even better life sequences than others. They can only care about how things go for them *at any given time*: "For a lower animal, then, momentary well-being fails not only of additivity but of cumulability by any algorithm at all. Consequently, the totality of this subject's life simply has no value for him" (Velleman, 1991, p. 77).

However, the capacity to care condition has bizarre implications: A future of agony cannot be worse for the cow, overall, than a future of pleasure, and so it can never be better for them to die than face miserable prospects (see Bradley, 2016; McMahan, 2002, pp. 488-489). Velleman's narrative view implies that there never is a reason to justifiably kill an animal for their own sake; that death or a future life of suffering are, from the animal's perspective, equivalent prospects, even if *at any given moment*, it is worse for them to suffer than not.

As noted, McMahan argues that narratives might give greater value to one's life as a whole, and perhaps a capacity helps to confer coherence upon it. Bradley concedes as much too (2016, p. 62). However, it does not follow that for life to be intrinsically valuable for someone, they must be able to care about it. We can aggregate well-being across an individual's moments even if that "individual cannot care about the aggregate well-being in its life." (ibid.) Even if narratives matter, they are not necessary for life to have value.

A final way in which narratives might matter is if they are required for one's life to be meaningful and meaning is a key ingredient of death's badness. John Martin Fischer argues, drawing on Williams (1973) and Susan Wolf (1997; 2010), that categorical desires also determine meaningfulness in life by grounding projects, which determines the *special* badness of death for meaning-seeking creatures (Fischer, 2020, p. 81). Fischer also contends that nonhuman animals lack the capacities to live meaningful lives, which presuppose categorical desires: "Only a being who can act freely, and is in contact with

reality (in a suitable way), can live a meaningful life. Such a being writes his or her story through free will" (Fischer, 2020, p. 23).

But this account of the special badness of death of persons does not exhaust the grounds on which death can be bad. It is just worse, "possibly a tragedy", for a being with the capacity to lead a meaningful life. But "none of this implies that the cat's life is not important to the cat, or that *nothing* of value is lost when a cat dies" (ibid.). Fischer thus lays out a two-fold account of the badness of death (p. 83): it is a deprivation of what would be, on balance, a good continuation of life, and it thwarts categorical preferences about the future. The death of a non-person, who lacks categorical desires, merely robs them of future pleasant experiences.

But even if we accept Fischer's view about the special badness of death for meaning-seeking creatures, there are questions about what specifically it implies for the deaths of non-human animals. First, we could dispute the view that animals are incapable of living meaningful lives. For instance, Purves and Delon (2018) argue that, insofar as they contribute to valuable outcomes (e.g., helping a buddy, stabilizing a social group) through intentional agency, many animals can confer meaning on their lives. If that is correct, death robs such animals of more than just pleasant experiences.

Further, if some animals can have meaningful lives without categorical desires, and meaning contributes to the value of one's life, then Deprivationism entails that it is worse for such animals to die than for beings who are incapable of meaning. Because, say, dogs' or pigs' lives can have meaning, there is an additional dimension along which premature death can be bad for them.

Finally, narratives matter but not necessarily from the *first-person* point of view. James Rachels (1983) argued that death is an evil when it ends a life in the biographical, not merely biological, sense, and that having such a life is sufficient for a right to life that extends to at least most mammals. Lori Gruen writes,

Being the story-tellers we are ... allows us to make meaning of the deaths of humans as well as nonhumans in our families and communities. Whether or not other animals are able to imagine the foreclosed possibilities of the deceased, humans do have the capacity to dwell on the harms that come not simply from missing the dead, but from mourning the loss of what could have been. (2014a, p. 61)

This and the fact that other animals appear to grieve or understand death (King, 2013; Monsó and Osuna-Mascaró, 2020) suggest that death is at least a “social harm” (Gruen, 2014a). Accordingly, the attitudes of people working and living with animals should inform our judgments about the overall value of their death (Abrell, 2021; Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Jones and Gruen, 2016). We turn to this question in the final section.

5. The goodness of death

The distressing fact is that the point of optimum life span for shelter animals is likely to be much earlier in its life than for companion animals who have morally decent human guardians. ... As a form of shelter population control, euthanasia has a role in ensuring that a larger portion of shelter animals do not live long enough that they would have been better off dead. (Cholbi, 2017, p. 277)

If the choice is between existence without joy, without relationships, without exercise, without fresh air and sunshine, and non-existence, I think the choice is painfully clear. (Gruen, 2014b, p. 134)

Shelters have to make innumerable hard decisions. They host animals who are terminally ill, are in great pain and will likely die in a matter of weeks; animals who are terminally ill but whose pain is manageable and who may have a year of active life ahead of them; animals with chronic illnesses whose treatment is painful but whose pain can be

managed; animals who cannot be rehomed because of aggressive behaviour and for whom shelter life is miserable; and animals whose species-specific needs are difficult to meet in captivity such as pythons and parrots.¹⁵ One general question regarding the killing of animals is whether its justification turns on the same considerations as human euthanasia. A more specific question is what information we need, if it is permissible, to make such decisions in shelters.

5.1. Asymmetries

We already came across the idea that for animals “suffering matters more”, that death need not be “a terribly tragic misfortune for an animal” even though their suffering counts (nearly) as much as that of a person (McMahan, 2002, p. 199). That view is presumably widely shared. Yet at the same time, “[m]any people are reluctant to accept that euthanasia can be legitimate in the case of persons. ... they believe that the life of a person has such great value that it should generally be preserved even if continued life will involve the endurance of great suffering” (ibid.). How can we explain the intuition that many people who care about animals also approve of the painless killing of shelter animals who cannot be rehomed or cured?

The “more extreme variants” of Suffering Matters More imply that, for animals whose suffering matters a great deal, “it would usually be best, other things being equal, to kill any such animal painlessly” (McMahan, 2002, p. 201). If killing an animal can prevent protracted suffering, and suffering always matters more than death, then killing them appears to be morally unobjectionable except when it would harm *human beings*. In fact, on the strong version of Suffering Matters More, almost “any painless killing of an animal would count as euthanasia” (ibid.). Belshaw (2016) comes close to such a view. But if we accept that many animals’ lives contain suffering, and death matters very little to them, then the cases of justified killing will proliferate.

¹⁵ Thanks to Angie Pepper for helping me frame the introduction of this section.

McMahan rejects this extreme view (2002, p. 201), but he finds the weaker versions defensible. Death being normally less bad for animals than for people, killing them is also less seriously wrong. For instance, it can be better for a young stray animal to die than face near-term prospects of significant suffering (p. 202). According to the TRIA, their present time-relative interests in avoiding *future* suffering are weak (because their mental lives are weakly connected), but their interest in avoiding *immediate* suffering is strong. It all depends on the distribution of the balance of good and bad experiences over time. But, McMahan notes, similar reasoning applies to persons. Bracketing "additional constraints on *killing*", such as respect for autonomy, McMahan thus puts pressure on the initial asymmetry (ibid.). Suffering Matters More presupposes "an asymmetry between an animal's capacity for happiness and its capacity for suffering" (p. 203). The idea is that "animals are incapable of many of the higher dimensions of [positive] well-being accessible to persons: for example, deep personal relations, aesthetic experience, achievement through the exercise of complex skills, and so on" (ibid.). It is very hard to justify prospects of suffering, especially for stray animals, if few goods of significance are likely to compensate for it. According to McMahan, then, it is easier, in many cases, to justify the killing of animals with poor prospects than human euthanasia.¹⁶

Likewise, Michael Cholbi (2017) has recently argued that the euthanasia of companion animals and the assisted killing (or suicide) of humans only share "a superficial similarity" (p. 264). Many considerations pertaining to both voluntary and involuntary euthanasia fail to apply to animals. Considerations of autonomy are unlikely to be of much help. Animal euthanasia is thus "better classified as *non-voluntary* euthanasia, the beneficent killing of a being neither in concert with, nor contrary to, its

¹⁶ After reviewing many more technical complications (2002, pp. 487-492), McMahan concludes that formulating a fully coherent view is difficult: "The positive justification for animal euthanasia therefore remains elusive." (p. 493)

consent" (p. 266). Moreover, because of cognitive differences, animals' fear of death is "far less mediated by their beliefs and attitudes than our fear of death is" (p. 267). I will follow Cholbi in focussing on animal *well-being* and granting that some non-welfarist values may shed light on human euthanasia.

5.2. When and who

Cholbi appeals to a comparative account of the value of death (see Section 1 above). It estimates the value of death by comparing the actual life of a being, at the time of their death, to the life they probably would have had if they had continued to live—the nearest counterfactual life, to be precise. This may be a life as long as the average life expectancy or, less plausibly, the maximum lifespan for their species, or the life they would have had if, say, they had received treatment for the cancer that killed them. Whatever the benchmark, if they would have been better off had they survived, death harmed them; if they would have been worse off, death benefitted them. If both lives are equally good, then the individual is neither harmed nor benefitted (Cholbi, 2017, p. 268).

Take twelve-year-old dog Ridge, who has cancer. In contrast to Cholbi's example, let's assume Ridge currently lives in a shelter. According to the comparative account, whether to euthanize Ridge at a given time depends on whether, at that time, "Ridge does not stand to gain by living longer, but also loses nothing by dying at that point" (p. 269). This would be the right time to die—at the point of "*optimum life span*". The crucial question is whether, on balance, they stand to lose or gain. We can never determine with precision the right time. But when, with reasonable approximation, more life would be neither a benefit nor a harm, euthanasia is *permissible*; when more life would be harmful, it is *required*. A surprising implication is that euthanasia is never *merely* permissible (i.e., optional). It is either forbidden (too soon) or obligatory (at, near or after the optimum cut-off point) (pp. 270-271).

Euthanizing *near* the optimum point involves “conscientiousness and awareness of the possible sources of distortion in [one’s] decision-making”, such as financial considerations (“too soon” cases) or strong emotional attachment (“too late” cases) (p. 270). Cholbi’s argument does not concern shelter animals. Typically, the decision to euthanize belongs to the guardian, while the procedure is performed by a veterinarian. However, the question of who counts as a guardian or the authorized spokespeople in shelters is ambiguous.

Let us bracket the issue of authority, which guardians have with respect to their companion animal, to focus on the person who is best situated to know what’s best for the animal. Shelter animals have often gone through several households, spent time on the street, and their personal histories may be obscure. This leaves many gaps in the knowledge required to make informed decisions. We can nonetheless assume that some designated staff possess the appropriate moral authority to decide whether and when to euthanize, if the question is an open one. Unlike guardians, shelter workers are not in an asymmetric position of authority with respect to animals. They have less discretion, and their decision is more likely to be directly informed by veterinarians. However, an ethics board can also inform decisions and clarify responsibilities under a “decision tree”.¹⁷ Assuming that properly informed staff have the right to euthanize, how can we ensure that their (and the board’s) judgments will best reflect the foregoing considerations?

First, note that the relationship of guardianship partly captures the relationship between shelter workers and animals insofar as the former are supposed to be acting *for the sake of the animals* rather than out of sheer efficiency or convenience. Granted, shelter workers lack valuable information that comes from long-standing relationships

¹⁷ See Section 3.B of [The Ethics of Animal Shelters: Guidelines and Recommendations](#).

(Cholbi, 2017, p. 277), but their authority regarding this particular animal is still grounded in the animal's interests.¹⁸

Now consider the epistemic issue. Since the relevant moral facts are intrinsic facts about well-being rather than facts about the animal-guardian relationship, the decisive criterion is the optimum life span of the animal given reasonable expectations concerning their future quality of life. The discretion that befalls on guardians or workers does not hinge on their special relationship as such but on their privileged epistemic position—their “intimate knowledge” in the case of guardians (p. 274). Given that they are typically less attached to animals than a guardian would be, shelter workers’ decisions are less likely to be biased. There is no reason to suspect that they are less capable to act in the animals’ best interest, or to assume that guardians’ decisions cannot be distorted by their familiarity, despite their enjoying a “depth and continuity” of knowledge, including of personality, sensitivity to pain, disabilities, and so on (Milligan, 2009, p. 404).

In any case, decisions will have to be sensitive to species, personality, and other factors determining the profile of the animal, including age and health, and whether they’re the kind of animal likely to be adopted soon, would fit well in an apartment, be safe around children, or fare well under shelter conditions. While such considerations may not pertain to intrinsic facts about well-being, they are nonetheless relevant to expected quality of life. Further, when workers can reconstruct a narrative about an animal—say, who was abused or already endured a lot of pain—different decisions can be made based on equivalent medical prognoses and levels of suffering. For instance, future suffering may be worse, while future pleasures would have more significance, for an abused dog—two considerations that can point in opposite direction, since one

¹⁸ This is simplifying a bit. Shelter workers have duties to animals who are not currently in the shelter too. They must consider, when deciding whether to prolong the life of some animal, how this may affect another animal’s chances of being rescued.

might want to redeem past suffering by at last giving the dog a good life.¹⁹ This is something both guardians and shelter staff factor into their decision. Here, telling a story (albeit not from the animal's standpoint) could help.²⁰ A dog who suffered with abusive guardians or who was seized from a puppy mill should, perhaps, get priority in the attribution of resources over another dog who did not endure such suffering, even given equivalent prospects. These are, again, complex ethical questions on which an ethics board can help make progress.

Guardians and workers can draw on knowledge that the animal lacks, such as their medical record, their history of abuse, their needs and personality. Whoever occupies the privileged epistemic position will have discretion in deciding whether and when to euthanize. Their decision, however, should primarily (albeit not exclusively) be done considering the animals' interests. In some way, this makes the notion that shelters euthanize due to resource constraints overly simple. Because of their limitations, many shelters cannot afford to offer a good life to many animals, so the killing is done in their best interest considering material constraints. Killing can prevent future harms, such as the harm of being kept in a shelter for a very long period or the harm of being returned to the streets or wild. Of course, shelter staff would need to have a reasonable belief that it is better for an animal to be killed now rather than suffer terribly in a year or so because of the effects of shelter life. Or, they would need to have a reasonable belief that, if their shelter can and will release some animals, these animals would fare well in the wild, or that it is better to let them take their chances. Whether death, now, would be good hangs on several factors as well as the most plausible interpretation of "the best interest" of the animal. Such an interpretation itself depends on how one weighs competing values such as welfare and freedom. Because this chapter is neutral about

¹⁹ See Angela Martin's discussion of the priority view in this volume (§4.1).

²⁰ See Gruen's (2014a) quote in Section 4.

the best theory of well-being, it cannot answer these questions. But we have laid a blueprint that can help in the decision-making process.

Conclusion

Despite theoretical disagreements, we can cautiously conclude that death is of significance for many animals found in shelters. Desires may be relevant, but it would be reckless to conclude that their lives are not worth living or death never bad for them just because they lack sophisticated desires. Death is bad because it deprives animals of a valuable future. But by the same token, death can be good when it prevents a future life of misery. Given our uncertainties, both theoretical and moral, Deprivationism recommends that one treat animals as if a premature death would normally be bad for them. Yet there are circumstances that can justify killing in the shelter context, without having to claim that death, for these animals, does not matter. The value of death depends on an animal's interests, their psychology, and their life prospects. The justifications for killing them turn on further factors, including the interests of other stakeholders and what one knows about the animal.

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