Mercy Killing: Mercy for Whom?

In a classic film portrayal of the depression era, the character played by Jane Fonda responds with the question, "They shoot horses, don't they?" when asked why she killed her chronically miserable companion. The audience is left to reach its own conclusion about the merits of "mercy killing." I am left with the question, "Yes, but why do they shoot horses?"

We all know "they" shoot horses. It is part of our literature, part of our culture. Many of us remember the thoroughbred Ruffian, killed on the infield at Belmont Park after she shattered her foreleg during a match race with Foolish Pleasure. The rapid Old Teller was shot; so was The Yearling; Black Beauty was shot too. Actually, as my veterinarian friends are quick to point out, we no longer shoot horses; they are disposed of by lethal injection. But however we kill them, why do we do it? Why do we put injured animals "to sleep"?

We kill them "to put them out of their misery." With horses, there may be no alternative. A horse cannot live with a broken leg or with only three legs, many horse owners tell me. Actually, this is not the case. Cattle at large-animal orthopedic departments at veterinary schools revealed that horses can exist on three legs, although they are likely to break down with tenonitis or laminitis in the contralateral leg. Or, a horse can be fitted with a prosthesis after amputation, although this course is also not without complications. The point is, there is a choice when a horse breaks its leg. It is not absolutely necessary to kill the animal. However, allowing it to hobble on three legs might create new pain, and thus we return to the dictum that killing them relieves their misery.

Killing old, sick, injured, or unwanted animals is common in our society; it's a major function of humane societies. And the reason nearly always given is that we are doing it for the animals' sake, that we are relieving (or sometimes preventing) their misery. This reasoning bears closer examination.

Is there any evidence that sick animals want to die? Social animals sacrifice themselves to protect offspring or the herd, but I cannot find in the literature or in folklore suicide by animals in a hopeless situation. Perhaps we can gain insight into animal preferences regarding death vs chronic misery by reviewing our knowledge of the human animal.

Very, very few humans kill themselves, no matter how sick or crippled they become. And most of us who do want to die are recognized by the medical community and by society at large as being depressed, as suffering from a potentially reversible mental illness. There are examples of so-called rational suicides-Freud and Hemingway come to mind—but these are remarkable in their rarity. Instead, the experience of every physician is of individuals clinging to life, fighting, as it were, to the last breath. How many patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, with cancer, with congestive heart failure actually kill themselves? The vast majority of these people do not do not want to die, they tolerate long, tedious, sometimes painful treatments in the frequently vain hope of prolonging their lives.

I return to the question: Why do we shoot horses? There is no reason to think they want us to. Why do we shoot horses? One reason is that they are unable to stop us. We kill horses and other animals because they cannot tell us not to. Their inability to communicate is coupled with our ignorance of their inner experience; we do not know what they are thinking or what they want. We can say, "She would not want to live this way" without fear of contradiction. Another reason for killing horses is the relief of suffering, but we must ask, whose suffering is being relieved? When someone states, "I couldn't stand to see her suffer," whose suffering is taking precedence: that of the suffering animal or that of the human owner suffering feelings of helplessness or inconvenience?

I do not challenge our killing of animals when they become troublesome. That is a separate ethical point. My point here is to demonstrate that our true motivation for putting animals to sleep may be very different from what we say it is. We cannot bear to watch an animal suffer; we would rather kill it instead.

The concept of mercy killing, if not the reality, is enjoying a renaissance of sorts, but with a new type of victim—the patient with Alzheimer's disease. Celebrated cases in California and Florida are almost immediately translated into a television documentary. A suicide machine is developed, and patients with Alzheimer's can give themselves lethal injections. The Oregon legislature considers a bill that would allow physicians to kill such patients if requested by someone appointed by the patient when he or she had been competent.

Few academic geriatricians have escaped interviews with earnest young reporters wishing to probe the ethical implications of such an act, the underlying question being whether the husband or wife or children or physician or society has the right (or perhaps even the responsibility) to relieve suffering by killing the patient with Alzheimer's disease. Once again we must ask: Whose suffering is being relieved? In my years of caring for such patients, I have known few who were chronically miserable. My impression is that patients with Alzheimer's are no more or less happy than those with normal cognitive functioning. But the families suffer terribly. There can be few argonies as great as witnessing the mental deterioration of a loved one. In many ways, the individual has died, but the mourning process cannot be resolved because he or she lives on. Add to this the physical burden of caregiving for a demented relative, and it should be very clear who is suffering. It should also be clear who are the recipients of mercy in the mercy killing of an Alzheimer's patient. What do we hear over and over from the interviews, the docudramas, the analyses? "I couldn't stand to see her suffer." Mercy killing, like all killing, is the ultimate selfish act.

Patients with Alzheimer's are vulnerable to mercy killing for the same reason as horses: they cannot object. Humans and other animals do not want to die. We do not kill ourselves. Where this breaks down is when a person's continued existence becomes very painful to those who love him or her. But this is not enough. The potential object of a mercy killing must also lose that human capacity to communicate his or her wishes. We know nothing of the inner experience of the patient with Alzheimer's disease. The Alzheimer's patient, or the patient in a chronic vegetative state, or, for that matter, an infant, assumes a vulnerability similar to that of horses: their loved ones, with the best of intentions, can put them to sleep to relieve their suffering, whether or not they want to die.

The point I am making is relatively minor. It does not address the ethics of mercy killing. It is merely a plea for accuracy, for truth-telling, when the motivations surrounding mercy killing are discussed. I do not doubt the reality and severity of the suffering endured by the relatives of Alzheimer's patients, but it is their suffering, their misery. There is nothing altruistic about mercy killing.

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