



A Higher Standard than for Cats and Dogs

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Sometimes people will point out:

"We euthanize our pets when they suffer, and they are clearly creatures of God, so why can't we euthanize a sick and suffering person who wants it? It seems like we treat our dogs and cats better than we treat our suffering family members."

The way we treat animals, however, should not be the measure of how we treat fellow human beings. We keep animals as pets, but we don't do the same with humans. We use animals to make clothing and food, but we don't do the same with humans. For all our similarities to the rest of the animal kingdom, we are aware of a fundamental difference in kind between ourselves and our furry friends. We are not meant to die just as animals do, or be euthanized as they are. The death of a human is a more complex event that has other important realities associated with it.

In euthanizing a cat or dog, an assessment about the nature of the creature is rolled up into our decision to proceed. Our pets seem to process the world around them mostly in terms of pleasure and pain, oscillating between these two

poles as they instinctively gravitate towards pleasurable experiences, and engage in "mechanisms of avoidance" when they come up against pain or discomfort. Animals lack that uniquely human power to reason about, resign themselves to, and allow good to be drawn out of pain. Animals can't do much else in the face of their suffering apart from trying to skirt around it, escape the situation, or passively endure it. Because of our strong sense of empathy, humans find it more emotionally acceptable to "put the animal to sleep," rather than watch it suffer a long and agonizing death.

But it would be false empathy, and a false compassion, to promote the killing or suicide of suffering family members. As human beings, we have real moral duties, and better options, in the face of our own pain and tribulations. On an instinctual level, we tend to recoil and do our best to avoid suffering, just like animals. But we are able to respond in a way that animals cannot, and even willingly accept our suffering, which is unavoidably part of the fabric of our human existence. None of us lives out our life without encountering some suffering, even if it may be purely

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internal, like the agony that comes from loneliness, isolation, depression, or rejection. Every person must, in one way or another, confront suffering along the trajectory of life, and human maturity is partially measured by how we deal with suffering.

Those who live with serious disabilities, through their determined and beauty-filled lives and example, remind us every day of the good that can be drawn from suffering. The way they deal with their struggles manifests the depths of what it is to be authentically human. It is precisely disability, with its disfigurement, impairment, vulnerability, and dependence that challenges us to grasp the outlines of our human journey in a less superficial way, and to value human life and protect human dignity in sickness as well as in health. Victoria Kennedy spoke to this same point when describing Senator Kennedy's final months:

"When my husband was first diagnosed with cancer, he was told that he had only two to four months to live.... But that prognosis was wrong. Teddy lived 15 more productive months.... Because that first dire prediction of life expectancy was wrong, I

have 15 months of cherished memories.... When the end finally did come—natural death with dignity—my husband was home, attended by his doctor, surrounded by family and our priest."

As human beings, we reach beyond the limits that suffering imposes by a conscious decision to accept and grow through it, like the athlete or the Navy seal who pushes through the limits of his exhaustion during training. We enter into an awareness of something greater behind the veil of our suffering when we come to accept it as an integral component of our human condition. We also give positive example, strength and encouragement to the younger generation as they witness our response to, and acceptance of, our own suffering. Our trials and tribulations also teach us about our reliance on God and the illusions of self-reliance.

On the other hand, if our fear of suffering drives us to constant circumlocution and relentless avoidance, even to the point of short-circuiting life itself through euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, we can miss those mysterious but privileged moments that invite us to become more

resplendently human, with all the messiness, awkwardness and agonies that are invariably part of that process.

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