

The Killing Cure

by Craig Brestrup, PhD

One day as I sat having my hair cut, my barber told me of his recent hunting trip. I responded in a fashion indicating that surely there were better things for him to do than unnecessarily end the lives of innocent wild animals. His immediate, vigorous, and heartfelt response was to remind me of what shelters did to dogs and cats.

I could have tried to show the difference between the two situations. He could have talked about being a natural predator in time with nature, and I could have mentioned overpopulation and suffering, etc. But we both would have missed the issue of the intrinsic value of animal life, and I already felt my credibility as an advocate for animal welfare had been compromised.

The community of nonprofit animal sheltering organizations occupies the paramount position (at least potentially) for being a powerful advocate and change agent for companion animals. But how persuasive can that community be when it speaks of qualities such as kindness, mercy and compassion to animals while still sponsoring the killing of those same animals? Can we believe that this contradiction is not lost on the public and does not seriously dilute the life-affirming message that we intend to send? If the message spoken by the animals' "best friends" is sufficiently diluted, is the solution to animal suffering merely prolonged?

The issue of physician-assisted suicide for humans raises related issues of trust and responsibility. Will allowing a medical professional to help terminate a patient's life insidiously damage doctor-patient relationships? Can a patient maintain confidence in a physician who may be mixing the determination to heal with thoughts of facilitating death? I believe the issue only becomes problematic when there are concerns that a family's or physician's motivations may be based on serving interests other than the patient's. In like manner, the public is sure to recognize at some level that not all of the animal killing performed at shelters serves the interests of animals as much as it does the interests of man.

But those concerns about physicians crossing the line from saving to terminating lives approach what might be the central reality underlying such discussions. When the subject is humans and their own euthanasia, there hovers around it a sense of human life as sacred and how best to express respect for that life. I want to take it further. Our reverence should start with the awe inspired by all life rather than niggling down to only human life. Life itself remains the grand reality, and its value should not be obscured to the point that respect boils down to just attending to life's gentle passage into death. If those who include non-human animal life within this expanded purview wish to be persuasive with that conviction, they have great reason to re-evaluate their bearings, methods, and ultimate aspirations.

The first unintended consequence of shelter practices, then, is the diminished credibility and influence of so called animal advocates because of the incongruity between their words and actions urging better treatment for animals while facilitating their destruction.

The second consequence of open-door policies pertains to the likelihood that when shelters offer the convenience of "rescuing" guardian-relinquished animals, they inadvertently reinforce the idea of animals' disposability. And when full shelters continues to take in animals, one must question the priorities of this helping profession toward existing and potential "clients". Helpers of humans have uniformly favored the welfare of existing clients, while animal shelters have taken the more expansive position of serving all comers, even when that means killing some to make space. I submit that this looks like what it is: a betrayal of the animals already taken into care.



Another effect of a shelter's revolving door is that relieving people of the consequences of their irresponsible behavior may only reinforce such behavior. Most people take on an animal casually, impulsively, carelessly, uncommittedly and then want relief from the burden, at least for the present. But what do they learn when they desert their companion at the shelter on their way to the mall, or out of town, or to the new apartment? Not the lesson that would prevent a repeat occurrence. If shelters want to alter this behavior they must do more than exhort about guardian responsibility: they must expect it and help provide the means to bring it about. Most relinquishing guardians feel guilty, as they should; there is an optimal, change-motivating level of guilt that anyone who has done wrong should experience. But I fear that when the caretakers at the humane society assume the guardian's responsibility, that guilt becomes easier to shed.

The third unintended consequence of nonshelter killing relates to motivational pressure to change, to be innovative in a search for promising alternatives. Today, killing the excess preserves the numerical balance between live animals and the number of available homes and shelter spaces. The number killed rises and falls depending on demand and except for the ravaged emotions of shelter workers, it seems an efficient machine, something like a recycling center, as a shelter board member once put it. But does it work too well? If the streets are cleansed of straying animals and mangled bodies (as they should be), and guardians have non-stigmatized means of abandoning their animals, where is the inherent pressure to change? Ironically, "relieving suffering" of today's excess animals may well result in the prolongation of killing as society finds the expedient disposition of animals preferable to the bother of changing its own mechanisms.

Shelter workers feel the strain of this "solution" most strongly, but they are both powerless and convinced of its unending necessity. This mirrors the tendency of contemporary medicine to devote itself to increasingly exotic, intrusive, and expensive diagnostics and treatments for disease while neglecting prevention and behavior modification. Killing healthy animals is a treatment that does not cure.

It is probable that all kinds of social services, from welfare to health insurance to psychotherapy, have unintended negative consequences. The difference with animal welfare is that its contradictions go to the heart of the enterprise and help to defeat its larger purposes and subvert its deepest values. As my barber clearly recognized, we cannot condemn killing with one voice while doing and defending it with another without sinking into apparent incoherence. Animal advocates will be an effective voice for animals when our actions reflect a consistent and uncompromised respect for their lives.

<http://www.saveourstrays.com/KillingCure.htm>

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