



Negotiating care and control: Pet euthanasia as phronetic action

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ABSTRACT

The lives and deaths of animals living with humans have become increasingly medicalised, and the life of a pet usually ends with euthanasia conducted by a veterinarian. In this paper, I explore how pet euthanasia is understood as a good death in interactions between vets and pet guardians in veterinary practice, provided as an act of care for old and seriously ill or injured animals. Drawing from interviews with vets in Finland, I discuss the ways in which care and control are negotiated in the decisions and practices concerning pet euthanasia, and their implications on understandings of old age and death in animals. I approach the task of euthanising an animal without a prospect of continuing life in Aristotelian terms as phronesis, as knowledge about the right and appropriate ways to act in a certain situation.

Introduction

The lives and deaths of animals living with humans have become increasingly medicalised, with a widening array of health care services available to pet guardians. This development follows a similar one taken place in human medicine. The crucial difference to human life, however, concerns death: the life of a pet almost always ends with euthanasia carried out by a veterinarian.

Veterinary science and practice, play a role in the societal relations between humans and animals in different contexts, including food production, laboratory research, wildlife management, sport and pet keeping. As an expert, the vet represents scientific knowledge about the animal, an approach to nonhuman life that the veterinary profession has actively constructed (Jones, 2003: 115–140). Originally, veterinary science and practice developed for the care for animals used for human benefit, providing food as well as working power (McShane & Tarr, 2007). From the early 1900s onwards vets have increasingly provided services for pets and their guardians, thus contributing to the development in which emotional values attached to animals – as opposed to use value and monetary value – have become widely recognised. This phenomenon is epitomised in the ways in which pet keeping has become mainstream culture, thereby promoting the acknowledgement of the agencies and subjective experiences of pets, the focus on their wellbeing and their role as members of multispecies families. One of the important practices of veterinary care available for pets is euthanasia.

Along with recent developments in veterinary science it is now possible to treat more complicated conditions, and many pets are able to live well until old age with medical support. Veterinary practice has thus enabled animals to live longer than previously. At the same time, it has created a situation where for pets, euthanasia has become the most acceptable way to die, reflecting cultural understandings of a good death for animals (Rollin, 2009). This does not, however, make the decision on animal euthanasia easier for guardians – or even vets – epitomising how generic ideas concerning good death and proper care are complicated by embodied interspecies relationality and the different experiences, knowledges and expectations of guardians and vets. Preparing for the decision marks the last phase of life for the animal as well as the human–pet relationship. A major challenge regarding the decision to euthanise a pet concerns the appropriate time, especially in the case of slowly progressing conditions. In many countries, it is up to the guardian to make the actual decision on pet euthanasia. The vet, relying on their scientific expertise, supports this decision with their medical assessment and justification for determining the appropriate time.

In this paper I discuss pet euthanasia and its implications on cultural understandings of old age and death in animals. Drawing on interviews with vets in Finland, I analyse the provision of a good death to animals as a situational, ethical and relational practice. The focus of the analysis is on vets' experiences, understandings and justifications regarding action and decision-making as well as on their approach to the procedure of pet euthanasia itself and consideration of the experiences of the guardian.¹ I

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¹ I use the term 'pet' for animals living in an interactive relationship with humans, sharing everyday life in a home, often in the position of a family member (Fudge, 2008; Schuurman, 2024). In the interviews, the respondents shared their experiences in canine and feline euthanasia; therefore, the pets mentioned in the analysis are dogs and cats.

explore the practice of pet euthanasia through a social science lens, with the means of descriptive ethics, focusing on how decisions are situationally made and euthanasia conducted in practice (Holloway, 2002). I ask how and in what kind of situations decisions on pet euthanasia are made, what the significance of the encounter between the pet's guardian and the veterinarian is at the moment of euthanasia and what vets consider a good death for a pet. I pay special attention to the ways in which the established practice of animal euthanasia affects the possibility for pets to live well into old age. In the analysis, I approach the effort at providing a pet with a good and timely death with the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, describing the ethical dimensions of decision-making, building on tacit knowledge and used in professional practice (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Frank, 2012; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012).

The practice of euthanising animals has a major impact not only on the lives of animals but also the understanding of old age in animals living under human care and control. Old age and death are among the contexts in which the conceptual boundary between humans and animals is especially discernible. There have been several studies conducted on pet euthanasia in the social sciences (e.g. Morris, 2012; Sanders, 1995; Schuurman, 2017), but almost none on older animals in the context of a pet-human relationship (for exceptions, see Pierce, 2012; Yamasaki, 2020). Old age for animals has thus far almost exclusively been studied in contexts of human medicine (laboratory animals) and older humans (pets living with older persons). In this paper, my aim is to evoke discussion on the ways in which animal euthanasia as a routine practice providing animals with what is perceived as a good death without excess pain and suffering implies a critique towards the possibility for animals to live well into old age.

In what follows, I will first introduce the theoretic framework and the data and methods used, before presenting the results of the analysis and the conclusions.

Theoretical framework

Pet euthanasia

The word *euthanasia* comes from Greek, meaning a good death. In practice, what is understood as a good death depends on individual circumstances as well as societal norms. Leichtenritt & Rettig, 2001: 86) define a good death as 'a multidimensional phenomenon based on physiological, personal, interpersonal, social, and cultural domains of life'. In the case of animal euthanasia, the emphasis is slightly different. Here, a good death is generally understood as an ending to a life that cannot be continued any longer, but also as an acceptable and painless way of killing the animal (Holmberg, 2011; Rollin, 2009). A part of the expertise of a veterinarian is the skill to achieve both aims. For pets and their guardians, however, a good death also includes the situated experiences and emotions involved in a human-pet relationship developed over time as well as interpretations of animals as subjects and agents (Schuurman & Franklin, 2018).

The death of animals is shaped by different cultural conceptions and practices. The most significant conceptual, cultural and societal difference between humans and other animals is arguably found in the norms regarding killing: killing animals is more easily accepted (Haraway, 2008). The acceptability of killing a particular animal depends on the animals' societal position and categorical distance in relation to humans (Leach, 1964). Killing is most often acceptable in contexts where the animals are perceived as different from humans, as beings that do not have the kind of consciousness or agency that would justify an understanding of them as 'persons' (Sanders, 1995). In the case of pets, who live physically and emotionally close to humans, the relationship between pet and guardian is significant, and guardians often describe their pets as friends and family members and learn to know them as individuals with their own subjective experiences (Charles, 2014). The grief caused by the death of a pet can in such situations be compared to the emotions felt for the demise of a close human (Redmalm, 2015). In

the case pet euthanasia, however, feelings of grief can be exacerbated by guilt over euthanasia – whether it was timely or not considering the age and health of the pet, and whether it could be justified as a good death (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Schuurman, 2017).

For pets, euthanasia is generally accepted in certain situations and by using certain methods. Euthanising ill, injured, or very old pets is commonly agreed on, sometimes also pets with no guardians or those with serious behavioural challenges such as aggression towards humans or other pets. Killing healthy animals, however, tends to cause uneasiness and resistance, thus blurring the categorical boundaries in which animals are culturally placed (Haraway, 2008). In such situations, taking responsibility for the actual decision to euthanise can be considered a practice of 'killing responsibly' (Haraway, 2008: 81), implying a relational ethics of responding flexibly to circumstances (Srinivasan, 2013) in which the value of life is balanced with the quality of that life (Redmalm, 2015; Rollin, 2009). In this vein, pet euthanasia can be understood as an attempt at caring well for the animal, with a purpose to provide them with a dignified and humane ending to their life, without pain or suffering, when it seems obvious that the animal's life cannot be continued anymore (Law, 2010; Rollin, 2009). At best, pet euthanasia may become the final moment of a lifetime of good care and wellbeing for the animal.

The vet has the power and the responsibility to end the life of an animal and thus also the lived emotional relationship between the pet and the guardian. The vet does not only act in relation to the animal; instead, the guardian represents the animal in all situations and practices of care, including euthanasia. The guardian has a duty of care for their pet, but once the pet becomes physically infirm it may be increasingly difficult to fulfil this moral obligation. The ways in which the guardian and the vet know the individual animal and understand their need for euthanasia may differ, but the vet's possibilities to act against the wishes of the guardian are limited (Yeates & Main, 2011). The vet's personal understandings about animals and the ethical justification for their killing further affect their decisions to euthanise. These understandings vary, from a subject and agent capable of feeling pain and agony to a mechanical, almost inanimate object and the property of the guardian (Rollin, 2005). For these reasons, euthanising a pet is a task which vets often find burdensome.

Phronesis and situated knowledges

The effort at giving a pet a good death can be explored with the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, which can be translated as 'practical wisdom' or 'deliberation about values with reference to praxis' (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 57). *Phronesis* is one of Aristotle's three 'intellectual virtues', the other two being scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and skill (*techne*) (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012). *Phronesis* as a concept refers to knowledge about the right and appropriate way to act in a certain situation. It can therefore be applied to decision-making concerning responsible action which includes both ethical and practical dimensions (Jamal, 2004). The aim of phronetic action is a good life, achievable only by practical action that responds to the particular situation, not by following abstract rules.

The action in *phronesis* as well as the values guiding it are based on tacit and situational knowledges, including personal experience and relational knowledge of another being (Schuurman & Franklin, 2019). Relational knowledge about animals implies knowing their individual life histories as well as understanding their subjective experiences of wellbeing. Such knowledge can be generated from interpretations of the animals' actions and expressions in interaction with them in contexts such as interspecies care, where individual knowledge of the animals and their needs is crucial. Decisions made within everyday care practices are often based on tacit, relational and situational knowledges and, when their aim is a good life, they can be understood as phronetic action. Knowledge about animals and their care varies situationally, however, and what is considered good care for certain individuals, in certain

contexts, can in others be perceived as neglect – even in cases where the explicit aim of the action is the wellbeing of the animal.

Phronetic action which aims for a good life for an animal epitomises the relationality of interspecies encounters, with a focus on embodiment and materiality (Despret, 2013; Haraway, 2008). A relational approach emphasises the animal's own agency, implying that the individual animal is understood as a conscious, feeling subject capable of understanding their own experiences and acting on them, instead of being seen as purely a passive object of human action (McFarland & Hediger, 2009). In human–pet relationships this is often the case: in close interaction with pets it is possible to learn to know them as individuals and to interpret their subjective experiences as well as their mental and physical needs. Interpretations of animals are situationally guided by different types of knowledges, including tacit knowledge rooted in cultural conceptions and practices, sources of written knowledge as well as embodied knowledge and the skill to read and interpret animals from subtle signs (Schuurman & Franklin, 2019).

For vets, their ability to interpret health, ill-health and pain in animals is derived from not only their scientific expertise but also their personal experiences of observing, encountering, touching and treating animals (Enticott, 2012). Vets observe animals by their appearance, alertness, expressions and gestures, but they also palpate animals by hand (Law, 2010). Whatever their impression of the animal's state of health, the vet cannot make a decision on their treatment without communicating their observations and treatment options with the guardian. This is especially important when considering euthanasia as an alternative to supporting the continuation of life for the animal. The centrality of observing and interpreting animals and negotiating treatments with guardians implies that veterinary practice is essentially situational (Enticott, 2012). However strictly the vet tries to stick to professional rules, it is crucial to understand the specific situation of the living animal – and their guardian – to come to an individual decision regarding treatment or euthanasia, a decision that could be considered phronetic action (Archer & Kinsella, 2023).

Data and methods

For this study, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with vets around Finland. With the aim of covering different positions, backgrounds and career phases, I recruited the respondents using two channels: the websites of municipal veterinary services and an internet search for private practices.² For the purpose of this article, I have assigned each respondent a pseudonym. In Table 1 I present the interview data by gender, age group, type of practice (municipal/private) and area (rural/urban). The respondents had all been born and trained in Finland.

Two of the interviews were conducted by phone and the rest in person, in the respondents' place of work or in their home. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min, often restricted by time and scheduled client appointments, and they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The respondents all found the topic of the study important: many had given animal euthanasia a lot of thought and felt a need to talk about it, often because of working alone and not being able to share their experiences with a colleague. As a result, the interviews developed into discussions with considerable depth, and sometimes the respondent kept on talking even if the time allocated to the interview had ended. After nine such interviews the material was fully saturated, meaning that new interviews did not add to the information gathered but, instead, repeated what was already said. Therefore, no more interviews were needed.

For analysing the interviews, I applied thematic analysis with a

² In Finland, veterinary care is a public service, provided by municipalities until 2022 and transferred to wellbeing services counties in 2023. In addition, there is a wide private sector providing veterinary care for pets.

Table 1

Respondents by pseudonym, gender, age group (25–35, 35–50 and 50–60), type of practice and type of area. The purpose of age groups is to secure the anonymity of the respondents in the small sample.

Respondent	Gender	Age group	Type of practice	Type of area
Kati	F	25–35	Municipal	Rural
Elisa	F	25–35	Municipal	Rural
Anne	F	35–50	Municipal	Rural
Marko	M	35–50	Private	Urban
Tiina	F	35–50	Municipal	Rural/urban
Jenna	F	25–35	Private	Rural/urban
Mia	F	25–35	Private	Rural
Petri	M	35–50	Private	Urban
Eeva	F	50–60	Private	Urban

contextualist focus on revealing the ways in which people make meaning of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I first coded the interview material into preliminary themes, including the ethical justifications for euthanasia, interpretations of the subjective experiences of the animal, encountering the guardian and their presence during euthanasia, disagreements between the guardian and the vet on the need for euthanasia, the role of veterinary expertise as well as the significance of space. During the analysis I was able to refine the focus of the study and primarily concentrate on three specific themes for a more detailed analysis: decision-making on pet euthanasia, miscommunications and disagreements between vet and guardian as well as the technicality and relationality of death. In the following sections, I present the analysis of the data according to these themes. All translations of data from Finnish to English are mine.

The decision to euthanise

The decision to end the life of an animal is primarily based on the interpretation by a veterinarian of the animal's bodily condition and subjective feelings of pain and suffering. These are assessed in relation to the animal's life history and what can be medically observed, and subsequent decision-making requires ethical consideration concerning the animal's current quality of life (Law, 2010). According to the data, most cases of pet euthanasia are conducted in a situation where the animal is either seriously injured or terminally ill.

It is the guardian's responsibility to conclude that the animal is in need of care and bring them to the clinic in the first place. Often the reason for the visit is not exactly euthanasia – guardians are encouraged to pay regular visits with their older pet, in order to assess the situation with the vet. Regular follow-ups become a practice of negotiating animal aging, with the purpose of retaining some control over the approach of death as it becomes increasingly visible (Franklin & Schuurman, 2019). For many guardians it is difficult to recognise and interpret the signs of pain or suffering in their pet. Interpretation is further complicated by the process of growing old, which often leads to gradual changes in the animal's bodily condition, sometimes hard to distinguish from signs of illness (Allweiler, 2013). On the other hand, a seemingly happy and active animal may go on looking healthy and well even while in pain. In such cases, the vet has to explain in detail the kind of behaviour that may refer to serious problems.

Ultimately, the decision on whether the animal will be euthanised or not is the result of interaction between the vet and the guardian. Many conditions progress slowly and may only be observed gradually; therefore, the timing of euthanasia is a central dilemma. The general principles regarding the avoidance of pain and suffering are not easily applied in practice because, even for vets, assessing the pain of an animal may be complicated. The ways in which animals feel and express pain vary individually and, thus, any interpretations of the impact of pain on an animal's quality of life are ultimately subjective. The possibility of misjudging the animal's situation and consequently delaying euthanasia is a serious risk and a shared worry for vets. One interviewee,

Elisa, points out: 'do we keep them in pain every day, when animals do have the other alternative [...] There really isn't a clear line' (Elisa). Such use of analogy between animal and human medicine in the context of euthanasia is not uncommon, suggesting a situational blurring of the species boundary (Hurn & Badman-King, 2019, see also Hobson-West & Jutel, 2020).

Many vets want to be on the safe side, choosing to act rather too early than too late in order to avoid excessive pain and suffering. While the purpose of such action is understandable, however, the risk remains that the animal is euthanised prematurely. Further, it raises the question of potential distrust in guardians' ability to observe pain in their pets. Here, the communication between vet and guardian is crucial: apart from knowing the animal, the vet tries to assess the extent to which the guardian is able to read their pet's subjective feelings of wellbeing and any changes within.

Ironically, it is the lack of a clear, universal rule for when to euthanise which renders pet euthanasia phronetic action (Frank, 2012). The vet has to take personal responsibility for the decision, based on their own expertise and tacit knowledge, including their personal experience of euthanising animals, their skill of interpreting the condition of the animal and their ability to communicate and collaborate with the guardian. Even for professionals, interpreting the subjective experiences of animals is never simple and there is always a risk that something goes unnoticed. Negotiating care for physically infirm animals can be understood as an ongoing process of 'tinkering' (Mol, 2008), which includes 'observing, assessing, pondering, experimenting, and making numerous necessary decisions at the level of the individual animal, that eventually lead to the final decision of death' (Schuurman & Franklin, 2018: 113). The attempt at avoiding pain may sometimes lead to a preference for a shorter life with a better quality, instead of a longer, potentially painful period of growing old:

I have always told people who wonder whether their pet should be euthanised that if you're already thinking about it, then they should be euthanised. Some line has then been crossed. Also, I would say, rather sooner than later. There will always be time for grieving after the procedure. (Jenna).

While the view expressed by Jenna above seems rather extreme, it can in some situations be read as a sensitivity to what the guardian may already have observed in their pet but feels unsure about. There are other cases, however, where the guardian is aware that there is something wrong with the pet and has come to seek help, with hopes that the pet will be well again. After assessing the situation, the vet may then come to a different conclusion:

For many, when there has hopefully been a good life and then the quality of life starts to slowly go down, there really isn't an optimal point in which we have to euthanise. It is more like a zone that we arrive at [...] It is often wise not to start following up, how [the pet] will recover [from an illness] It is after all natural to grow old and die. (Marko).

Here, the interviewee refers to a possibility that a serious illness may be treated but recovery is not certain. Therefore, the pain and suffering expected during treatment should be avoided. To justify euthanising the pet, he frames old age and death as a natural sequence in the life of an animal. However, in the quote above the difference between approaches to old age and death becomes visible in terms of risk. The natural process of growing old is presented as a potential risk which can be avoided by conducting euthanasia – instead of waiting for natural death. This is recognised by many guardians, and sometimes the whole topic of their pet growing old is difficult for them to discuss with vets because of its apparent link to euthanasia. This is evident in the following quote, describing how the link is indirectly implied by the vet and picked up by the guardian during a phone call:

They had a 13-year-old dog that they suspected had a heart failure. I said on the phone that you have an older pet. I did not say anything about euthanasia and there was no mention of a treatment [...] They told me right away, don't say that. It's a message from that person that they know but don't want to hear about it. (Petri).

Sometimes the pet's approaching death is paralleled to that of the guardian, possibly making the inevitable loss easier to accept:

With older clients, you notice that they have thought more about their own approaching death, more than young people, and for them it is kind of more natural, not such a shocking thing. (Marko).

It is clear in the interviews that for vets, interpreting the subjective experience of an animal is closely tied to their own understanding of animals and their lives. The respondents emphasise the need for species-specific behaviour in animals, which for them leads to a concern about possible overtreatment, especially in cases of terminal illness. Many are also critical about new methods that have recently been introduced in veterinary practice, such as invasive treatments for cancer and the use of wheelchairs for animals with amputated legs. Such practices are considered problematic from the viewpoint of the animal: 'A dog is still a dog, an animal, they come from nature, from wolves [...] Would they like to live like that, or would it be nicer for them to be running in other fields?' (Elisa).

For the vets, the aim of phronetic action is good life for the animal, and the criteria for a good life are based on the scientific understanding of the animal as a biological organism, or a 'natural' being. From such a viewpoint, medical treatments of which the benefits the animal does not understand and which may even lengthen the animal's suffering, should be restricted to the human world. The idea that human-induced death is a logical response to the natural process of an animal growing old is repeatedly expressed in the interviews, suggesting an effort at keeping the species boundary intact (see also Redmalm, 2015: 11). On the other hand, such thinking may also have its roots in the agricultural era when prolonging the lives of farmed or working animals – let alone pets – was often not possible. As I will show in the next section, however, this argument is used in different ways depending on context.

Miscommunication and disagreement

One of the most challenging tasks for the vet is to persuade the guardian that their pet has to be euthanised, especially in cases where the vet perceives an immediate need for euthanasia (Morris, 2012). Many of the interviewees describe miscommunication, misunderstanding and disagreement while discussing with pet guardians their reasons for recommending instant euthanasia. The situation is especially difficult if the animal's poor condition comes as a surprise to the guardian and there has been no previous communication between the vet and the guardian.

Sometimes the situation develops so quickly that it is hard for the guardian to grasp and to come to terms with. The animal may be brought to the clinic because of a minor issue, or the guardian completely misunderstands the animal's symptoms. When the vet then recommends euthanasia, not all guardians are able to make the decision entirely unprepared. In some cases, however, the animal's condition is so serious that the decision has to be made without delay, to avoid excessive suffering. One interviewee, Marko, recounts such a case, explaining to the guardian that the poor condition of their cat required immediate euthanasia: '[the cat] would probably have died on the spot anyway, so I briefly explained the basics and implied that I'd put the fellow down, right now, and got a kind of nod' (Marko). For the vet, the situation required instant action, albeit with permission from the guardian. The urgency of the situation led to mutual misunderstanding, with the result that the cat was euthanised before the guardian even realised what was going on.

According to the vet, the guardian was confused and then shocked,

and the vet himself expressed distress while recounting the event during the interview. In his view, the cat was in excessive pain, which for him was a reason for conducting instant euthanasia. Paradoxically, however, his estimation that the animal was considered beyond saving, already facing an immediate death, itself might question the need for euthanasia. For the vet, though, not euthanising the cat would have been risky from a professional and ethical viewpoint: a possibility for further suffering, however short in time, would have been unacceptable. This extreme case illustrates the fundamental difference between the medical role of the vet and the everyday interspecies relationality in which guardians and pets live, highlighted in the finality of death. It also reveals the difficulties faced in communication about pet care when veterinary expertise does not necessarily include skills for encountering guardians and understanding their viewpoint.

When discussing pet euthanasia with guardians, vets may postpone it for a day or two, to give guardians time to fully comprehend the enormity of what will happen – if the animal's condition allows this. The situation may be further alleviated if vet, guardian and animal are already familiar to each other. Many interviewees emphasise mutual trust, enabling the vet to focus on their work and the guardian to accept euthanasia:

When they have visited us a long time and there is probably some kind of trust, it is easier for them to make the decision when they know and when I also agree that it is the right moment for letting the animal go [...] They don't need to wonder whether it should have been done now or next week or in a month. (Tiina).

All interviewees have experiences of disagreeing with guardians on pet euthanasia. The disagreements may stem from differences in the ways in which the vet and the guardian perceive animals, even if they both see them as sentient subjects. For the guardian, what is at stake is the life of a close friend or family member, but for the vet, the most important task is to end the pain and suffering of the animal. The respondents find the guardian's anguish understandable; however, it is sometimes interpreted as selfishness compared to the animal's needs: 'people perhaps think more about themselves at that point, because the animal is so dear, they don't want to give [the animal] up, and they wish the animal would still get a bit better. It is a difficult situation' (Mia). The phronetic objective of the good of the animal involves meeting the guardian, and in actual encounters the vet always has to rely on their own expertise to assess the possibility of acknowledging different needs and interests (Frank, 2012). In making a decision, however, the vet's ethical responsibility towards the animal ultimately weighs most.

There are situations where euthanasia is not expected to serve the good of the animal. Sometimes animals are brought in for euthanasia without any apparent reason for the guardian to wish to end the life of their pet – the animal simply does not have a place in their guardian's life any longer. For the vet, this poses another difficult dilemma. Even when euthanising a young, healthy pet is against their moral principles, it may be impossible to refuse as the power to decide is legally with the guardian (Yeates & Main, 2011). Many of the interviewees have had to euthanise an animal in such situations, explaining that if they refused, there would always be another vet available and willing to conduct euthanasia. However, several respondents have denied euthanasia and taken the animal in their care for the purpose of rehoming them later, although this is often not successful and the animal may end up staying with the vet.

Euthanising a healthy animal for the sake of convenience epitomises a tendency to understand animals as objects and as property instead of sentient beings (Rollin, 2005). Subsequently, the vets' refusal to euthanise young and healthy animals reveals their own affinity to animals and their unwillingness to perform euthanasia at any cost. Although it is not always easy to act according to one's ethical principles, this becomes easier for vets as they gain more experience:

Earlier maybe, in the beginning, you somehow shut it off, that it was work and it had to be dealt with, and if that person thought they wanted to euthanise [the animal] then it was my task to do it. But today, it's changed a bit, how I think, and I have more courage to criticise the person's grounds for euthanising and to consider other alternatives. (Tiina).

When pets begin to grow old, guardians may find it difficult to engage in a discussion about the animal's approaching death. In the previous section, nature was discussed as something that defines life and death for animals. Old age was seen by vets as a risk for the animal's wellbeing, often managed by conducting euthanasia, which was then framed as a natural ending to an animal's life. Paradoxically, however, dying naturally does not seem to belong to the same category of recommended 'naturalness'. According to the interviewees, some guardians do wish that the animal would die of their own accord, in a way which could be considered natural. Such a death would be an exception in a society where animal death is highly controlled and, as a result, natural death in domesticated animals is rare (Marvin, 2006). Sudden deaths are not completely alien to the vets interviewed but, in general, they are doubtful about the possibility of a natural death:

I believe the animal has been unwell for quite a long time before the arrival of a natural death. I don't recommend a natural death. [...] If for instance there is a [...] chronic condition and [the guardian] thinks, well, let them die naturally, it's a bit cruel I think, if you see that the animal is suffering the whole time. (Mia).

For vets, the possibility of a natural death implies losing control as well as a failure in their own work. As a way of dying, a 'natural' – or uncontrolled – death, with the associated risk of excessive pain and suffering, is to be avoided. This serves as a justification for drawing the line between euthanasia and ongoing care – care which is in this context framed as non-innocent, not necessarily serving the good of the recipient of such care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The question concerning natural death thus positions veterinary science and practice firmly against the possibility for allowing animals to grow old in an uncontrolled way; the clearer the signs of old age expressed by the animal, the more stringent will the medical control be on their remaining life. Such an active attempt at controlling nonhuman life reveals the extent of power embedded in interspecies care relations.

Death as technical – and relational

In pet euthanasia, the actions of the vet can be understood as a performance of good death, with the purpose to make death look peaceful and dignified and to create good memories for the guardian of their pet's last moments (Schuurman, 2017). Vets usually let the guardian be present at the time of euthanasia. This has not always been the case – for example, in the 1980s there were suggestions that it would be better for the guardian not to see the euthanasia of their pet (Morris, 2012). For guardians, encountering the physical death often feels strange and a cause for worry. There are distressing elements about the procedure of animal euthanasia which may frighten guardians and confuse them about whether and when the animal has actually passed away: 'it feels as if they follow every movement' (Jenna). The guardians' emotional stress is also stressful for vets, not only because animal euthanasia is a technically complex task, requiring time and full concentration from the vet. Many vets therefore prepare guardians for the euthanasia of their pet by explaining what they can expect to see.

According to the data, the procedure of pet euthanasia at a veterinary clinic may make the ending of a life seem a technical act and reduce the boundary between life and death to a matter of bodily functioning, obscuring the relational aspect of death. For the guardians it may therefore be very difficult to say goodbye to their dying pet at the clinic, in the presence of the vet in preparation for euthanasia. For the vets, however, expressing empathy to guardians during euthanasia may be

complicated. For the wellbeing of the animal, it is important that the decision on euthanasia is based on a careful assessment of the animal's situation. The vet also has to make sure the guardian's shock and grief do not prevent them from fully concentrating on the technical task of performing euthanasia. Therefore, the vet will have to control the guardian's expressions of grief or guilt before the procedure is over. According to [Morris \(2012\)](#), vets at this point rely on emotional labour; in other words, they do not express their own emotions in order to calm the guardian. This simultaneously serves to enhance the vet's performance of scientific, rational expertise.

Most interviewees, however, emphasise that the presence of the guardian at pet euthanasia is to the advantage of the animal: 'I always say that during the sedation, until the animal falls asleep, however bad it makes them feel they have to [be there] because otherwise the animal realises that the familiar guardian went away and left them here' (Anne). Here, the interviewee acknowledges the significance of the emotional relationship, not only to the guardian but also to the animal, and guides the guardian to act on it for the sake of the animal. The guardian is thus enrolled in the provision of a good death for the animal, becoming part of the phronetic action. Such an approach to the pet-guardian relationship seems to strengthen with years working as a vet, suggesting this is something vets have to learn through personal experience.

Although for a vet, the needs of the animal always come first, the ethics of pet euthanasia also include taking into account the needs of the guardian. Many interviewees talk about the guardians' grief for the dying pet and understand their feelings at the clinic environment where expressing grief openly is not easy ([Schuurman, 2017](#)). Some vets take a more active role in supporting owners and, for them, the encounter with the guardian of a dying pet has become an important part of veterinary practice:

Saying it aloud, that it is allowed to be sad, and to contact someone if you feel you can't cope with it, it is also good to bring that up and not only [...] in a way, wash your hands [...] so that you only have the technical task to stop the animal's vital functions and get out of there. (Marko).

As part of the performance of pet euthanasia, vets try to give guardians a chance to properly say goodbye to their pet without being disturbed. Many guardians make use of this opportunity and spend a moment with their pet both before euthanasia and afterwards. Often the guardian is present until the pet is sedated, but some stay with their pet long after death: 'I remember one who would have stayed all night, couldn't leave. That was a tough situation' (Marko). Veterinary clinics also have specific spatial practices aiming at alleviating the guardian's emotional experience, for example by allowing grieving guardians to leave through the back door, to guarantee privacy. Moreover, a considerate vet may let the guardian spend the last moments alone with their pet by leaving the room before the first drugs take effect, thus letting the guardian escort the animal to death.

Attempts at accommodating the emotional needs of guardians during pet euthanasia may complicate the work of a vet and require them to act in several roles, caring for both animals and humans, including themselves ([Law, 2010](#); [Morris, 2012](#)). Supporting guardians emotionally requires a different skill set from what vets are usually equipped with. The interviewees explain that understanding the importance of a genuine encounter with the guardian of a dying pet is learned over the years of working as a vet, eventually becoming part of the vet's professional experience and tacit knowledge. All this contributes to their ability to not only make pet euthanasia a good death for the animal but also a good – or bearable – experience for the guardian, in the sense of phronetic action:

Understanding that not everyone thinks in the same way as yourself, and that people have a wide range of feelings and emotions, that has

taken me a number of years before I've realised how much you have to read people. It's not very easy. (Tiina).

A major change in the practice of pet euthanasia concerns space. All interviewees agree that the place where euthanasia is conducted has significance for all involved: the animal, the guardian and the vet. Euthanasia at the clinic can be very stressful for the animal, who may have painful and frightening experiences of visiting the clinic. The home of the multispecies family is considered a more peaceful – and therefore the most suitable – place for pet euthanasia:

Only last week I went to euthanise this old cat, they just fell asleep on the carpet at home and died. [...] And they certainly did not suspect anything when there was no need to take them to the car and come here. This would be especially nice to older animals I think. (Kati).

At home, the procedure can be carried out in a familiar environment, in the midst of everyday routines. This is often also the guardian's wish, as managing one's emotion is far easier in the safe environment of the home, where it is also possible for all family members, including other pets, to say goodbye to the dying one. In this sense, the thought of a good death for an animal is compared to human ideas about the preferred place to die: somewhere that is felt as a 'safe place', possibly surrounded by loved ones ([Morris & Thomas, 2005](#); [Rainsford, Phillips, Glasgow, MacLeod, & Wiles, 2018](#)).

Moving animal euthanasia to the home where the vet has a possibility to consider the needs of both the pet and the guardian is a tangible example of phronetic action, a means to render pet euthanasia a good death. Following the moral principles of veterinary practice, it is a humane way to treat the animal as well as the guardian ([Frank, 2012](#)). It is, moreover, a practice that recognises the subjective experience of the animal as well as the relational network of interspecies care and kinship ([Haraway, 2008](#); [Schuurman & Franklin, 2018](#)). Giving the animal a chance to die at home also opens a possibility for them to age well, to the very end of their life.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed pet euthanasia as an effort to provide an animal with a good death, as phronetic action performed by a vet. End-of-life decisions made at veterinary clinics rely on the complex dynamic between the view of the guardian, observing the animal on a daily basis, as well as the scientific expertise, professional experience and ethical and situational judgement of the vet ([Hobson-West & Jutel, 2020](#)). These decisions have consequences for animal welfare, the vet-guardian relationship as well as the relationship between guardian and pet. Critical to a good death in the context of pet euthanasia are the correct timing of euthanasia, a genuine encounter between the vet and the guardian as well as the acknowledgement of the relational and private quality of pet death. From the vet, giving an animal a good death requires a skill to interpret the animal's subjective experiences. The decision to euthanise necessitates situational consideration built on tacit knowledge and personal responsibility, the qualities needed to make pet euthanasia phronetic action ([Archer & Kinsella, 2023](#)). The guardian, on the other hand, has to know their pet and observe their wellbeing in a way that supports the possibility for an ethically justifiable, timely euthanasia. The responsibility for ending the animal's life at any specific time is thus shared by and negotiated between the vet and the guardian, based on their understanding of the animal's present condition, previous life history and possibility to live well into old age.

Regardless of the moral worth of the decision, however, the act of conducting euthanasia, a routine and yet technically challenging task, risks rendering death predominantly a mechanical procedure controlled by the medical expert – the ultimate case of the medicalisation of animal lives. This is especially problematic because of the presence of the guardian during euthanasia, aiming to say goodbye to their beloved friend and family member. [Morris \(2012\)](#) suggests that pet euthanasia is

a special situation where ordinary rules concerning the expression of emotions between strangers do not apply. However, the emotionality associated to the ending of the relationship between pets and their guardians creates expectations regarding the successful accomplishment of pet euthanasia.

Many vets do try to support grieving guardians. Especially the vets with a longer experience in veterinary practice seem to understand the sensitivity of the moment and the importance of mutual communication and trust between themselves, the animals and the guardians. This is evidenced in the increasing spatial move of pet euthanasia from the clinic to the home, where the whole family, including other pets, are given the opportunity to escort their dying family member to death in relative privacy.

Growing old is arguably one of the contexts where the species boundary complicates the shared lives between humans and pets. In the data, old age in animals was discussed in terms of bodily fragility, including chronic conditions and terminal illness, perceived as the first stage of death and therefore cause for euthanasia. Death itself was considered 'natural', but the idea of old age leading to a natural death was not encouraged but instead seen as an undesired outcome of uncontrolled, non-innocent care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Old age was thus framed as a risk for prolonged pain and suffering, partly resulting from the difficulty for pet guardians to recognise signs of pain, but also potentially indicating miscommunication and lack of trust between vets and guardians. Yet, the situation where the routinized use of euthanasia is the only way of dying for pets supported by experts leads to a lack of discussion about the experiences, challenges and possibilities concerning old age in animals. Consequently, for pets, growing old is primarily performed as a problem, suggesting an ageist attitude towards pets that not only reflects ageism in human societies but also reveals an underlying view of animals as mechanical beings whose lives are primarily valued through their utility to humans.

Within pet culture, there have been discussions regarding a greater acknowledgement of the value of animal lives and care-full relationships between guardians and pets. These developments have created new demands for veterinary practice to consider the human-animal bond and the willingness of pet guardians to care for their older animals as long as possible. At the same time, there is a need for further research on what we perceive as safe and meaningful later life, and a good death, for animals. Likewise, understanding pet euthanasia as phronetic action suggests the need to study the wider questions and challenges identified in interspecies care – in life and in death. Another topic for further study would be the ways in which the increasing cost of veterinary care impacts on the possibilities of guardians to help their pets to live, age and die well. Such research would enhance knowledge about our relations with other species and the implications of living with humans on their lives.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nora Schuurman: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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