Equine euthanasia in end-of-life contexts: a triangular ethical decision-making framework

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Abstract

Veterinarians may recommend euthanasia, but the decision rests with the equine's owner. Faced with complexity in practice, especially for geriatric cases, one may wonder who really takes the decision? And who should take it? Does the veterinarian become a moral authority in such decision-making, at the cost of excessive moral responsibility? And what role should the equine play in enabling this decision process? By drawing on the analytical methods of the ethics of care and on research on equine agency, this paper presents a narrative-based, dialogical triangular euthanasia decision-making framework that situates this decision within its relational context, and adequately positions owner, veterinarian and equine as actors within this process.

Keywords: end-of-life, moral choice, ethics of care, narratives, equine agency

Introduction

Equine euthanasia gained ethical interest in past decades because it raises its own set of challenges (Merriam, 2011; McGowan et al., 2012; McGowan and Ireland, 2016). Equidae (*equus*) are a family of animals that includes horses (*equus ferus caballus*) as well as zebras, donkeys, and onagers (Thein, 2005). However, the terms 'equine' and 'horse' are used interchangeably in this text. How should we think about the decision of euthanasia for equines? Euthanasia is generally done by lethal injection administered by a veterinarian. The owner has moral and legal authority over the decision to euthanize; a veterinarian may recommend it, but does not have legal authority to decide. This paper focuses on the context in which an equine and owner have a common history and the question of euthanasia arises because of illness or geriatric decline. Convenience euthanasia and emergency euthanasia are not discussed. Understanding the experience of equine euthanasia decision-making is important because this decision often distresses owners (McGowan et al., 2012). This paper questions the legitimacy of these dyadic decision-making practices by emphasizing decisional power asymmetry that often overtax owners or veterinarians as well as silence horses. To face these worries, triangulation between (at least) three individuals (horse, owner, veterinarian) is defended as a framework to provide a fairer distribution of power, and thus better care.

Equine euthanasia in end-of-life contexts

Equine euthanasia in end-of-life contexts (hereafter EEEoL) are cases in which one thinks about euthanizing an equine because of a marked degeneration of her health or quality of life (QoL). The idea of 'quality of life' is a common evaluative concept to make sense of a horse 'doing well'. It is not co-extensive with the health condition because poor health (e.g., obesity) does not necessarily prevent a good QoL. In EEEoL, euthanasia is faithful to its etymological meaning: from the ancient Greek *eu*, meaning *good,* and *thanatos,* meaning *death, eu-thanatos* aims at giving a good death (Merriam, 2011). EEEoL differs from emergency euthanasia performed because an injury is too severe for recovery (e.g., a broken leg on a racecourse). It also sharply contrasts with convenience euthanasia based on owner relative

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reasons (e.g., the horse can no longer performs human deeds.). These forms of equine euthanasia raise different ethical questions. This paper focuses on ethical questions raised by EEEoL.

According to the orthodoxy, '*end-of-life*' is the short period when the horse becomes overtly the object of the procedure of euthanasia. I consider instead end-of-life as a period that extends in time, sometimes for many months, and that must be understood through biographical dimensions. End-of-life spans over an interval within which the horse's caretaker notices decline in health or QoL caused by old age or illness. I argue that a key event generally marks the beginning of end-of-life, as is the case within this example:

> Iduna was euthanized by lethal injection administered by the attending veterinarian at 7:30 on January 12. Iduna had drastically lost the use of her hips. It became increasingly difficult for her to get up if she layed down. M, the mare's caretaker, noticed changes for about two months previous to that day: since the first time Iduna was unable to get up on sand. On the evening of January 11, the mare went in her stable as usual where she lays on straw during the night. When M went to her at 6:00 the next morning, it was clear that she had struggled hard to get up, without success. M called Iduna's attending veterinarian. M and the owner decided that Iduna could not be left to endure another night of struggle. The veterinarian said that they were right to decide to euthanize. M said the veterinarian provided confirmation regarding the legitimacy of the decision and a sense of peace.[4]

This mare was euthanized following an end-of-life period that spanned over two months. A key event abruptly marked the beginning of this period. After which, Iduna's caretaker was more attentive to new aspects of the mare's life. Loss of mobility marks a turn in the mare's life story, but it does not, as such, declare that Iduna should be euthanized.

Problems of asymmetry and moral deference

Qualitative analysis of the lived experience of equine euthanasia decision-making in horse owners (McGowan et al., 2012; McGowan and Ireland, 2016) shows that:

- Among all the factors considered relevant to decide whether a horse should be euthanized, the advice of the veterinarian weighs more than most other factors.
- The decision to euthanize a horse companion is seen as a major and difficult decision by owners.
- Owners generally have a long history with the horse.
- Although euthanasia is intended to relieve suffering, interviews show that the process brings about more distress than relief from the owner's perspective. There thus seems to be a discrepancy between the alleged beneficence of the procedure and the owner's experience.

Following these observations, I shift attention from the role owner and veterinarian are formally expected to play in EEEoL decision-making, to the role they in fact play in this process, to raise three different, but interrelated, ethical issues. Veterinarians should give medical advice and execute the euthanasia procedure (Merriam, 2011; McGowan et al., 2012; McGowan and Ireland, 2016). However, studies show that they play a more expansive role, as they should, for instance: "Have appropriate communication" (Merriam, 2011, 169); follow up on the grief of the owner (McGowan and Ireland, 2016); give support over and beyond health-related questions: "the veterinarian is an important figure to provide active support before, during, and following euthanasia" (McGowan et al., 2012, 271). Additionally, owners heavily rely on veterinary advice. Thus, veterinarians perform medical and ethical expertise. Hence, in EEEoL

[4] I thank M for agreeing to give a qualitative interview that describes her experience of Iduna's end-of-life period.

decision-making, the owner, the veterinarian or both have agency. In contrast, self-assessment on the part of the horse is rejected (McGowan and Ireland, 2016). What should one think of this role distribution?

First, given that this decision is of major importance and can be distressing, we must question whether it is right that the owner bears the weight of the decision alone? Second, the veterinarian is implicitly given moral authority within this decision-making, which is unjustified and could be detrimental for her. A main consideration weighing in euthanasia decision-making is veterinary advice. Advice is a legitimate source of ethical knowledge if one can rely on it to critically assess a situation (Hills, 2013). It is problematic, however, when it becomes moral deference, that is forming one's moral beliefs solely on the word of another, thus outsourcing the decision to that other. This unloads the responsibility on the person deferred to. Given the seriousness of the decision in EEEoL, we might suppose that owners are prone to defer to the advisor, thus turning veterinary advice into moral deference. Taking the responsibility of the decision is beyond the duty of these medical professionals. Relatedly, I argue that this asymmetry of decisional power is reinforced given that the horse is not acknowledge as a possible source of knowledge for this decision. The view that horses are passive individuals who cannot inform their own destiny needs questioning; it is a stigma about animal agency. I thus raise a problem about the asymmetry of decisional power between the different actors involved in euthanasia decision-making. A triangular framework for decision-making grounded in care theory analysis should situate the decision to euthanize within a context, thus better situating the actors involved with regards to one another. The goal is to reach a fairer distribution of power and responsibility within EEEoL, thereby a better informed decision.

Situating choice

Ethical decision-making is generally considered as a punctual event: a decision, issued at time t, from a deliberative process, and from which an ethical action should follow. The decision follows a practical question (e.g., 'Should this horse be euthanized?'). In such representations the owner is inescapably faced with the difficult choice. These are truncated descriptions of EEEoL because they do not accurately account for the ethical experience typical of such situations. A careful observation of the way these situations are experienced disproves the adequacy of describing them as discrete choice making. This misrepresentation of the experience of EEEoL would explain some of the difficulties that arise when an owner is asked 'Yes or no?'. Thus, reinforcing the problems of asymmetry and moral deference because the owner is trapped within a position of sole authority. The ethics of euthanasia generally pertains to ways of providing a humane death (Merriam, 2016): the procedure must be as distress free as possible for the horse. Ethics thus focuses on the protocol of euthanasia significantly more than on the challenges raised by decision-making. However, in EEEoL ethical considerations emerge before and span beyond procedures.

Philosopher Iris Murdoch argues that at the time of choice the decision is already taken (Murdoch, 2002). The phenomenology of moral choice reveals that decisions build up throughout ordinary day-to-day experiences and cannot be abstracted from them. If that is the case, then what bears ethical weight comes prior to the decision itself, leaving the choice a matter of stating a verdict – making it, so to say, official – as is the case in euthanasia decision-making. Murdoch argues that choice-making cannot be disentangled from the life about which it is made because considerations pull on us from within the context in which we are embedded. Our experience is framed by this context: "I can only choose within the world that I can *see*..." (Murdoch, 2022, 35-36) Otherwise said, our capacity to judge of an ethical situation is framed by, but also informed by, circumstances that precede the judgment. If Murdoch is correct, then the decision of equine euthanasia should not be separated from the horse's life history. This favors a dialogue and narrative-based epistemology over a strictly medical epistemology to guide this decision-making. One way to address the problems of asymmetry and moral deference is thus to focus

on the question 'Who should decide?'. If life narratives and experience shape moral choice, and if choice in EEEoL is about the life of an equine individual, then the authority of decision-making should only be given to those who know the relevant narratives and have had the relevant experiences.

Equine agency

Horses are routinely depicted as passive creatures within euthanasia decision-making. Given that this decision bears existentially on their lives, should they not be involved in the process? Research on equine agency explains how the horse can decide collaboratively about her own faith. An agent deliberates, makes choices and moves toward a goal by responding to the features of her environment. Some conceptions of agency are more cognitively demanding than others. I maintain distinctions here between moral agency and social agency: horses decisively inform ethical choices as social agents, but humans make them as moral agents.

Equines are social agents: they influence their environment, relations, and specific situations both at intra and inter-species levels (Birke and Thompson 2018; Argent and Vaught 2022). These relationships are often framed by human expectations and choices, sometimes so much so that equines have little to no choices available for action. However, given the right conditions: "nonhumans also produce meanings and change outcomes in cross-species meetings [...] even within the limits imposed by [human] systems [...]" (Birke and Thompson 2018, 35) At least four dimensions of equine agency (Birke and Thompson 2018) are relevant to inform euthanasia decision-making: communication, the ability to read situations, the ability to respond, and emotionality. Indeed, understanding the social agency of equines is "centred on understanding action and the meanings we attribute to it." (Birke and Thompson 2018, 41) This attribution of meaning aligns with the central question at stake in EEEoL: is an equine's life still meaningful? The concept of QoL although it attempts to naturalize meaning, is a search for meaning. This sought after meaningfulness is reflected through cautious observation and understanding of equine agency.

Circles of care: triangulating equine euthanasia decision-making

The dyads stressed until now unite a caretaker and a care receiver: the owner is caretaker for the horse, who is receiver of care. The veterinarian is caretaker for the horse at the medical level, but the owner also becomes care receiver of the veterinarian when her authority is relied upon. Care theorist Joan Tronto argues (2009, 2013) that the dyadic model of caring creates a form of dualism, within which the caretaker finds herself not only sole bearer of responsibility but also trapped in a dominant role that risks negating her own vulnerability, incompetence and needs. This model fails to account for the broader relational character of caring. Tronto underlines for instance that although in our societies mother-child form a paradigmatic dyad of care, child raising actually involves many individuals. Deciding to end an equine companion's life is strenuous because it is relationally taxing. Recognizing caring dyads in EEEoL allows us to address problems of power arising within those asymmetrical relations. Given the shortcomings of dyadic models, Tronto argues that caring should be democratized through triangulation because many individuals ensure quality, and because flattened hierarchies improve communication, which in turn informs caring better. Not just any larger number of individuals is improvement, but the proper circles of care offer a better distribution of authority and responsibility and inform the decision better.

The method favored is collaborative dialogue between the different actors of the triangle. For EEEoL, I argue that the caretaker(s), the veterinarian(s) and the horse should form the decisional triangle. I use the term 'caretaker' to signify the individual (or individuals) who are responsible for the horse's daily care (food/water, shelter, ensuring social and emotional needs, health monitoring, exercising, etc.). Emphasizing the caretaker as a key actor for euthanasia decision-making breaks with the custom of giving

the owner decisional authority. I argue that the owner, depending on her relationship with the horse, is not always adequately positioned to inform the decision. One must be in contact with the relevant ethical considerations to be ethically justified in playing a role within decision-making.

A consensus within veterinary ethics is that euthanasia should be done to alleviate suffering (Merriam, 2011). Suffering is presented as a key consideration within this decision-making. This raises two questions: Is the horse suffering? Is the horse suffering so much so that death is justified? Crucially, these questions inquire into the meaning of the horse's predicament for her life as a whole. In EEEoL the concept of suffering is often equated with that of pain: it stands as a naturalized form of suffering that can be clinically evaluated. Hence, the statement: 'This horse has pain in her right hip.', might guide euthanasia decisions. However, this is problematic if we accept a conceptual difference between pain and suffering. Whereas the former has physiological markers, the latter, as well as the physiological markers, can only be evaluated through the lens of the *horse-self*: the meaning of her life, her desire to live and the like. Hence, the question: 'Does this horse still want to live despite the pain in her hip?' is decisive in such contexts. How does one make sense of a horse still having a meaningful life? Such meaning is revealed by all actors of the triangle who must be capable of making sense of the situation. Importantly, a horse owner qualifies as a legitimate actor in this triangle if and only if she is significantly involved in the horse's life. This would disqualify, for instance, owners who have outsourced the entirety of the care to other people, contributing only at the financial level. The triangular framework allows us to distribute responsibilities between those who are considered best candidates to make sense of death for an individual horse, including the equine herself.

The caretaker(s), then, along with the horse and the veterinarian, are best positioned to evaluate the predicament of the horse: to situate illness, injuries, loss of mobility, loss of appetite and other indicators, within the horse's story; her story in general and that specific to the end-of-life period. We ask whether this life is still meaningful. To answer this question the circle of care must ask where this life stands and where it can go. A description of a good or an ill-faring life requires fine-grained descriptions of the situation using specialized (thick) concepts (animated, lively, curious, peaceful or struggling, dejected, weary, haggard, etc.). Depicting the problem through narratives situates the horse as a key actor within the decision-making process because it is she who is best positioned to give information about her own life.

How do the four dimensions of equine agency manifest within the end-of-life period? Communication involves two other dimensions: human-horse communication implies that they are able to read each other's actions, mostly through body language and facial expressions. Was M, the caretaker of Iduna in the case introduced in Section 1, able to read her facial expression as she first struggled to stand up on sand? And how did this expression differ from other times in the day: grazing, resting or grooming with her equine companions? The ability to read equine social situations plays a pivotal role to explain how democratized caring takes place. Iduna's end-of-life lasted about two months. Within those months, the caretaker gathered, through careful attending, information about Iduna's situation. One morning it was understood that Iduna's life was no longer worth living. M relied on a species-specific understanding of the mare's predicament to draw her conclusions, as well as on individual-specific considerations. Iduna's struggle during her last night no longer fit in her life story. Even during the weeks leading up to the decision to euthanize, despite her hip degeneration, the mare was still lively. Horses are social animals who form long-lasting relationships of mutual care (i.e., friendships) (Kieson and Sams, 2021). During the weeks of decline, Iduna still spent time with her equine companions as per her usual habits; some she had been friends with for almost three decades. M needed to be able to know whether Iduna could still engage in typical equine gestures of mutual care. This, in turn, ties into the fourth dimension of agency, for emotionality implies the possibility to "form attachments, to seek out contact with others." (Birke and Thompson 2018, 38) M, most acquainted with Iduna's history, knew the equine and human

attachments she had formed, and could read situations where those relations varied because of her lack of mobility. Iduna displayed these realities. M could then convey them to the owner to motivate the fact that her life was still meaningful. The fact that Iduna could still be part of her social circle, and that M new the depth of those relations, was a key factor to cast the meaning of her loss of mobility within the right context.

As M was struck by Iduna's struggle, she understood that a certain kind of life was no longer possible for the mare. Iduna's feeble, uncharacteristic responses, were interpreted as the signal that this magnitude of struggle is too much. A night of laborious, fruitless, effort is not only suffering for a horse but implies loss of physical and mental energy because proper rest is hindered. In this story, the dialogue was first between Iduna, M and the owner. Dialogue was then issued between veterinarian, owner and caretaker, as the former arrived for the procedure. It brought confirmation, and, with it, a sense of peace. The upshot of focusing on narratives is a better understanding of an individual horse's needs, together with a possibility for shared understandings crucial to single out key considerations that underpin the decision-making.

Conclusion

This paper argued that triangulating equine euthanasia decision-making through collaborative dialogue empowers all those involved. Assessing whether an equine life is still worth living is demanding, without a doubt. This paper stresses that it is not as demanding as deciding outside of a legitimate context and adequate epistemology. This narrative-based, dialogical triangular euthanasia decision-making framework is not a paradigm shift: some of these steps are sometimes taken intuitively in practice. However, the democratization of such a decision should be institutionalized as such because it provides better care. Many features of the proposed framework will be relevant for animal euthanasia decision-making in general, especially that of companion animals.

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