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A Dog's Death

By [RANDY COHEN](#)

*I am a pediatrician who frequently treats children with kala-azar, a disease transmitted to humans from dogs by sand flies. Treatment of dogs and humans is painful, prolonged and not very effective. Euthanizing infected animals is the best way to curb the spread of the disease. A stray dog, Lisa, established herself outside our house, and we fed her daily. When kala-azar was diagnosed, we reluctantly euthanized her. Ethical? Dolores Protogoras, M.D., Athens*

This sad action was permissible, given the facts you present. You rightly imply a moral distinction between humans and nonhumans. No disease, no matter how horrific, would justify murdering human beings to prevent its spread. We sometimes impose such things on animals, however, destroying some fowl, for example, to protect others - and us - from avian flu.

To take so drastic a step, the threat must be serious, and there must be no other way to counteract it. You may not destroy an animal to curb a minor malady, like the spread of fleas, or a disease that can be countered by quarantine or inoculation.

This position accords moral standing to animals but places a higher value on people, something that Peter Singer, for one, professor of bioethics at Princeton University and author of "Animal Liberation," does not automatically do. In an e-mail message, he wrote: "Maybe killing Lisa was justifiable, if there was really no other way of preventing the spread of a painful disease to other dogs and humans. But I don't think that mere membership of one species rather than another can make a sharp difference to whether it is, or is not, right to kill an individual for the benefit of many others."

To confer higher status on human beings is not simply to champion the species to which we happen to belong. Rather, it reflects a willingness to consider intelligence, self-awareness and the capacity for suffering, among other qualities. It is an imperfect argument. An infant or a person in a coma might lack these qualities. But it does suggest that we value a dolphin over a mouse, a mouse over a worm. There remains a duty to avoid harming any animal, but there are circumstances, like that of Lisa the dog, when doing so may be justified.

*A few weeks after my bike was stolen, I saw it locked to a post. I knew it was mine, since I had modified it in various ways and recorded the serial number. I don't imagine it was the restaurant deliveryman who stole it, but I had no qualms about waiting for him to return and taking it back. Should I have called the police instead? Greg Faber, New York*

You didn't steal anything; you reclaimed your own property. And I'm impressed that you had sufficient charm to persuade this fellow to surrender the bicycle. If that's what you mean by "taking it back" upon his return, and not something more two-fisted, then you

did no wrong. Calling the police would have been futile: I can't imagine a patrol car speeding up, sirens blaring, before the delivery guy quietly pedaled away.

If you had spotted the bike not on the street but tethered in front of a restaurant, then you should have called the cops. There's a good chance that the bike would be there when they (eventually) arrived, sparing you the perils of vigilante justice and allowing them to check the rest of the restaurant's fleet and perhaps reunite another cyclist with his purloined bike.

*Send your queries to [ethicist@nytimes.com](mailto:ethicist@nytimes.com) or The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 229 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036, and include a daytime phone number.*

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