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What is suicide?

Commentary on [Peña-Guzmán](#) on *Animal Suicide*

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Abstract: Whether a person committed suicide is often difficult to determine, and intent particularly so. If it's difficult for humans, how much more so for nonhuman animals? A nonhuman observer would remark that humans usually avoid self-harm, but sometimes engage in self-injurious behavior. If instead of speculating about suicide we focus on self-injurious behavior that is sometimes lethal, we recognize continuity of species and can also understand and possibly remedy self-injurious behavior. To be kind and compassionate toward them, there is no need to impute doubtful capacities to animals. Kindness and compassion toward humans and other animals benefit the one who practices them.

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In an organized society, when a person dies, a coroner or equivalent official determines the cause of death and issues a certificate. Often the coroner easily decides on “natural causes,” because the person died in a hospital of disease. Otherwise, the coroner has to decide among accident, murder, and suicide. The decision may be difficult, particularly with suicide. A person is found hanging by the neck: is this suicide or murder? A person is found drowned: suicide or accident? A person overdoses on heroin: accident or suicide?

The traditional view of suicide focuses on intent, but questions about intent often find no clear answer. Even when a person leaves a suicide note, if it is posted where someone might see it in time (on a neighbor’s door, on the internet), the self-harm might constitute a “cry for help.” The Buddhist monk or the Tunisian street vendor who immolates himself may be acting politically, rather than intending to die. The same may be true of “suicide by police.” On top of all this ambiguity, suicide is often impulsive, triggered by some momentary event; people who survive jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge report regret on the way down. Finally, complicating the coroner’s job will be any stigma attached to suicide, social pressure against classifying the cause of death as suicide. Suicide, it seems, is much in the eye of the observer.

Neither free will nor a concept of death withstands scrutiny in trying to define suicide. Free will is an unsustainable concept that retreats the more we learn about the causes of

behavior. Creatures that respond to the loss associated with death cannot be said to have a concept of death rather than a response to loss.

The traditional view of suicide defines it in such a way that it would be a peculiarly human phenomenon. It would imply a discontinuity between humans and other animals that contradicts one of the implications of evolutionary theory: that all traits of a species derive from antecedents in ancestral species. The author correctly brings this “continuity of species” to bear on suicide.

Continuity of species, however, cuts two ways. Just as one may ask whether nonhuman animals commit suicide, one may turn the question around and ask, “What behavior do nonhuman animals engage in that would correspond to what is called ‘suicide’ in our society?” Peña-Guzmán (2017) correctly points to self-injurious behavior in animals. Both humans and nonhuman animals engage in self-injurious behavior under some circumstances.

What if, instead of looking at dolphins’ self-injurious behavior and likening it to human behavior, we imagine what a dolphin might say when looking at human self-injurious behavior. Better yet, suppose a Martian were looking at both human and dolphin self-injurious behavior. This nonhuman would observe that human creatures and dolphins usually avoid harm to themselves but sometimes engage in self-injurious behavior, sometimes even to the point of death. Lethal self-injurious behavior would be seen as a subcategory of the more general category.

If we are to understand and prevent lethal self-injurious behavior in humans, we need to stop moralizing about suicide and identify the causes of self-injurious behavior in general. Some of the causes are genetic or physiological, but many are environmental, sometimes historical events and sometimes ongoing. Categories include: isolation and idleness; pain and illness; loss and disappointment; torture and bullying; and availability of guns and drugs. The list could be extended, but the point is that these are factors that can be remedied and people can be taught to cope with them.

Finally, the question about animal suicide begs the question of compassion and kindness to other beings. As the Buddhists often point out, compassion for others benefits the one who practices it. One’s own mental and physical health are elevated by practicing kindness and compassion toward other humans as well as toward other animals. By doing so, one also avoids the trauma to oneself of committing acts of cruelty, as the effects of participating in warfare amply demonstrate. There is no need to rationalize kindness and compassion by trying to impute abstract notions about “personhood” to animals.

References

Peña-Guzmán, D. M. (2017) [Can nonhuman animals commit suicide?](#) *Animal Sentience* 20(1)