

ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Hediger, Ryan (2018) *Animal suicide and "anthropodenial"*. *Animal Sentience* 20(16)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1304

Date of submission: 2018-02-01

Date of acceptance: 2018-02-12



This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Animal suicide and “anthropodenial”

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

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Abstract: Increasing understanding of the impressive cognitive and social capacities of nonhuman animals suggests the possibility that they may sometimes commit suicide. Such notions tend to be dismissed as “anthropomorphism.” That interpretive hazard, I argue, must be weighed against the opposite hazard of “anthropodenial” — “the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals” (de Waal 2006). If animals do commit suicide, how often is it motivated precisely by the impact of humans on animal life?

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Peña-Guzmán (2017) makes a compelling case that debates about animal suicide often hinge on unexamined assumptions about both nonhuman animal and human capacities. His careful scrutiny of these assumptions shows that they can affect thinking about suicide and death. If we cannot be sure whether conscious desires cause animal suicide, then we cannot always be sure they cause human suicide. As so often happens in animal studies, revisiting nonhuman animal capacities unsettles our understanding of human capacities.

Peña-Guzmán cites studies indicating that animals have “awareness of death,” including evidence of animal mourning, such as burial rituals and melancholia, in a range of species (King 2016). These behaviors do seem to show some sort of awareness of death; but how much awareness is required to make suicide, as commonly understood, possible? Again, considering the human side makes this question thornier. Although humans are often credited with having awareness of death, philosopher Jacques Derrida raises important questions about just how far that goes. In his lectures on humans and animals gathered together in the book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Derrida criticizes the tendency to define humans in part by *our* awareness of death (pp. 27-28): According to Derrida, death is not knowable to the living; we can know *of* it but cannot know it. This weakens the human-animal distinction from the human side. The ethological data about animal awareness of death brings humans and animals still closer.

Yet Derrida does not mean to deny entirely the differences among forms of life. He questions what might be called the “hyperseparation” of humans from other animals,¹

recognizing differences but insisting that they are less absolute than commonly supposed. Where do the differences end and the similarities begin? We face a constant concern in these inquiries: anthropomorphism. Peña-Guzmán deliberately raises that specter himself in discussing the possibility of dolphin suicide in order to claim that it does not apply. In addition to the evidence of dolphins' impressive abilities, which imply the possibility of their committing suicide, Peña-Guzmán suggests — like Derrida — that a larger bias infects thinking about animals: “the bias of humanism.” His reply hinges in part on the blow to humanism delivered by Charles Darwin, whose notion of evolution demonstrates that human beings do not stand entirely apart from the rest of creation but evolved with it and within it. Peña-Guzmán accordingly favors a “continuist” view of suicide, recognizing that there is no single version of suicide and that different animals can be understood to exhibit different versions of suicidal behaviors.

Continuism makes good empirical and ethical sense, allowing for both likeness and difference. The hazard that is the reverse of “anthropomorphism” is what de Waal (2006) has called “anthropodenial”:

“the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals ... willful blindness to the human-like characteristics of animals or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves.... It reflects a pre-Darwinian antipathy to the profound similarities between human and animal behavior (e.g. maternal care, sexual behavior, power seeking) noticed by anyone with an open mind.” (p. 65)

These likenesses, de Waal notes, mean that a judicious form of anthropomorphism is not a problem; indeed, he suggests, it is often entirely rational and fits with what we know about human and nonhuman life. Without using exactly this terminology, Peña-Guzmán shows, regarding animal suicide, anthropodenial is at least as big a problem as anthropomorphism.

This does not necessarily mean that nonhuman animals commit suicide often. The rare exceptions may even prove the larger rule. Peña-Guzmán's example of the dolphin Kathy is especially disconcerting. I find his case persuasive that Kathy may well have consciously ended her own life, based on both the ethological and subjective evidence. Dolphins' intelligence is well-known, and Kathy's own depression from “living her entire life in captivity” offers enough context to make suicide seem plausible. Her case may show that at least some nonhuman animals are capable of suicide. But is it common? In this case, it was the highly unnatural, human-created circumstances that would have led her to decide to end her life. The ironies of this situation are grim: A dolphin's captivity is based on the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between humans and other animals (a difference that also justifies holding so many other animals captive in zoos and elsewhere); this in turn leads Kathy to “refute” the putative human/animal difference with an act that looks very much like suicide. Suicidal behaviors are often responses to unbearable social and personal conditions — conditions that intelligent humans have become all too good at creating.

Peña-Guzmán's argument that other animals can and sometimes may commit suicide raises further questions about why anyone commits suicide, and about whether or to what extent we should see suicide — in humans or in other animals — as natural. How often might suicide, whether by humans or by other living organisms, result from excessive human intervention in and management of life itself? To what extent might suicide be anthropogenic?

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¹ See Plumwood (1993) for a discussion of this term, mostly in reference to human gender differences (pp. 47-55).