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

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Abstract: David Peña-Guzmán presents two arguments against the view that because only humans have free will only humans can commit suicide: (1) nonhuman animals may possess free will, and (2) the libertarian notion of free will is incompatible with scientific explanation. The free will objection to animal suicide is indeed mistaken, but Peña-Guzmán's criticism of the libertarian notion of free will seems misplaced. His target should instead be the assumption that free choices must be made consciously or self-reflectively or the assumption that freedom cannot come in degrees.

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In his target article, Peña-Guzmán (2017) presents two arguments against the view that because only humans have free will only humans can commit suicide: (1) nonhuman animals (hereafter, animals) may indeed have free will, and (2) the libertarian notion of free will is unscientific. One can agree that an appeal to free will is not a good reason to deny that animals can commit suicide, but I argue that Peña-Guzmán's critique of the libertarian notion of free will is mistaken and misplaced. The free-will objection to animal suicide mistakenly assumes either that suicides must be self-reflective -- free choices made consciously -- or that free will cannot come in degrees. The libertarian notion of free will, however, need assume or imply neither.

1. Nonhuman Animals May Possess Libertarian Free Will. Peña-Guzmán begins and ends his target article with the kind of choice Camus and Socrates refer to, involving self-reflection and self-understanding. Those who think only humans can commit suicide because only humans have the requisite free will probably think that all suicides involve this self-awareness. Against this, Peña-Guzmán correctly points out that the term suicide is also used to refer to decisions to end one's own life that do not involve self-reflection. He then argues that there is no meaningful distinction between the free will of full moral responsibility (what Steward [2015] calls "full-blown free will") and typical nonhuman animal capacities to act freely.

Peña-Guzmán goes on to criticize the metaphysical or libertarian notion of freedom that he says underlies the claim that only humans have the free will needed to commit suicide. The libertarian view, however, neither assumes nor implies that only humans can have free will. It holds only that an agent's free choice consists in their directly causing (the initiation of) an action without being *necessitated* to do so (Rowe 1991). On this view, one's reasons or motives for various actions give one inclinations, of varying strengths, to act in various ways, and, in making a choice, the agent, whether animal or human, is choosing to act on some of them and not others. The libertarian view does not require that the agent be aware of these reasons, however.

It may be difficult to imagine selecting one reason unconsciously over others, or assigning weights or values to reasons one is unaware of, but it also seems quite common. Many behaviors that are done without thinking can have some degree of freedom, such as choosing the precise

path one walks home, or how to swing a bat at a pitch. These behaviors do not seem purely automatic; yet they are done without conscious awareness of selecting all their specific features. It feels as if we could have done such things slightly differently, perhaps by choosing to direct our attention differently or by making a different effort. Indeed, this is how Steward describes animal agency. So animals can be free on the libertarian view. The difference between human and animal freedom lies in understanding. Understanding enlarges the scope of free choice, including purely unconscious reasons and motives as well as conscious reasons and moral principles. Although understanding and self-reflection are important for the distinction between moral and non-moral freedom, they are not essential to an agent's capacity to cause an event without being caused to do so. Hence Peña-Guzmán is mistaken that the metaphysical or libertarian view of freedom implies that only humans are free. Humans and animals may share the same basic agent/causation power of free will, differing only in moral responsibility. Libertarian free will remains one of the ways to describe what animal and human free will have in common.

2. Libertarian Free Will Is Not at Odds with Scientific Explanation. Peña-Guzmán states that free will - the notion of a cause that is defined as "completely unaffected by natural causes" -- is a metaphysical concept that is at odds with scientific explanation (p.5). He does believe that animals probably have free will, so he must mean that only the notion of free that supposedly distinguishes humans from non-human animals would be unscientific. But this is still a misunderstanding of the libertarian view of agent causation. An agent cause is not completely determined by past events, but not necessarily unaffected by natural causes. One's various reasons and motives, along with their respective strengths, contribute to the explanation of why one freely acted as one did: They are available for selection and perhaps for ordering selection probabilities. They are influences and hence partial causes.

According to the libertarian view, there are degrees of freedom depending on how many of their reasons for acting agents are aware of, how much they understand them, and how much control they have over them. Hence neither the libertarian view, nor the view that free will is involved in some cases of suicide, is at odds with scientific explanations of suicide. Physical and psychological factors may diminish or extinguish an agent's causal freedom. For example, as Peña-Guzmán points out, the risk of suicide increases during antidepressant drug treatment. If there is any libertarian freedom involved in such suicides, it is an impaired and diminished freedom.

Finally, Peña-Guzmán writes that "no scientific theory of suicide incorporates free will into its explanatory space" (2017, p.6). However, as Peña-Guzmán correctly states, the libertarian notion of free will is metaphysical, not empirical, so it cannot be part of a purely empirical explanation. If empirical explanations of suicide were known to be complete, then agent causation could not be a contributing factor; but these explanations are not known to be complete in all cases. Therefore, without an independent argument against agent causation, Peña-Guzmán's response to the free will objection to animal suicide can only be to challenge its assumption that suicide must involve self-reflection, that free choice must be made consciously, and that freedom cannot come in degrees.

References

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