

On assisted suicide

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

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Abstract: What would be the moral implications of the capacity for suicide in nonhuman animals? Humans can be helped to end their lives if they no longer find them bearable. Should captive animals not be given the same possibility?

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Peña-Guzmán (2017) asks whether animals can and do commit suicide, and answers: probably, some of them. Suicide is causing one's own death with deliberation and aforethought, however brief the afore. It requires desiring the doing for the purpose before the doing. You may have your definition, I have mine, and mine has nothing else causal about it. I do not require that the thought causes the action, although it may, and I do not require volitions or freed wills acting or autonomy, whatever that may be.

So far as I *know*, Peña-Guzmán is right. I have seen animals seem to surrender to death — a squirrel caught by dogs, an antelope struck by a bullet — but I have never seen a case that I would describe as animal suicide. But then I have seen animals do any number of thoughtful, purposeful things that surprised me, and I do not in the least doubt that domestic animals with a frontal cortex, and their wild and feral kin, have thoughts. So I allow that some animals may commit suicide, or attempt it, or wish it. So what? Peña-Guzmán's moral conclusions seem faint.

The ability to deliberately end one's life is morally fundamental. I tend not to think in terms of rights, so I will put it this way: it is immoral to take the power to commit suicide away from someone. The poets and philosophers, the Donnes and Kants, have it all wrong, utterly wrong. No one knows another's inner life so well as the other; no one knows what is endurable to another; no one else has to do that enduring. Subjectivity gives the subject moral authority as to what is endurable, without veto by others. But of course, we do deprive animals of the means to commit suicide. Neither the caged bird nor the house cat has the means to commit suicide except starvation, which is a hard way in any case and requires an extraordinary resistance to the urges of the body.

So it is immoral to take the power of suicide away from people, and likewise for such animals that have the capacity for suicide, given the means. It would seem, conversely, that it is a kindness to provide both people and animals the means for suicide in case they should wish it. Fortunately, for most of us, humans, the means abound: the bus, the train, the high building, heroin, the blade, the pistol, the pill. It is especially kind to make painless means available. There

is no such abundance for our animal friends, especially pets, whose only means is starvation. It follows that it would be a kindness to make less painful means of suicide available to our domesticated animals if we can. Now the problem is how to do that. The animal must learn that the means *is* a means to death, but any such means is at once a hazard if the creature does not desire its own death. So it must be taught that the means, whatever it is, is hazardous and lethal, but (in keeping with the purpose of providing it) not excruciating. I would welcome Professor Peña-Guzmán's suggestions as to how to accomplish those circumstances for various species of our fellow creatures.

References

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