

Evolutionary continuity

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

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Abstract: The principle of evolutionary continuity states that all animal capacities and behaviors exist — with variations in degree — in continuity with other species. Rather than assuming discontinuity, we should ask why any behavior observed in humans would *not* be found in at least some other sentient animals under similar conditions. In the case of suicide, the more pertinent issue might be the ethical one: our human responsibility for creating conditions under which other animals might deliberately seek to end their own lives.

Keywords: evolutionary continuity, animal behavior, animal consciousness, animal grief, animal suicide

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Peña-Guzmán (2017) asks whether animals are capable of suicide, citing established philosophical notions of forethought and intention in the definition of suicide. The idea is that one must form the intention intellectually and then choose freely and deliberately to bring about one's own death. This rational capacity and moral freedom are presumed to set humans apart from other animals, but I contend that such a definition describes neither the human nor any other animal's motivations for self-destructive behavior.

The assumptions of human exceptionalism are wrong on at least three counts. The first error is the notion that humans are distinct from all the other animals when we are in fact biologically and psychologically continuous with other animals. The second error is the notion that we are superior to all the other animals, a concept that has no biological meaning outside a false comparison across adaptive behaviors and ecological niches. The third error is the highly questionable belief that human behavior is motivated by reason and free moral choice. Assuming evolutionary continuity between humans and other animals resolves these errors and gives more accurate direction to our study of both ourselves and other animals (Griffin 1976). Biologically, humans are not distinct from all the other animals apart from the taxonomic definition the species itself; we are in various ways and to varying degrees continuous with them on the evolutionary tree of life. Cumulative scientific evidence indicates that there is no empirical justification for human exceptionalism (Benvenuti 2016).

The classical form of human exceptionalism is scientifically indefensible not least in that it fails to describe humans accurately. Human cognition is far more implicit (i.e., less conscious) than the philosophers of rationality and moral freedom assumed. Cacioppo and Decety (2009) describe a contemporary understanding of human unconsciousness: “It is now widely recognized that cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes often unfold unconsciously and that this unconscious processing frees up limited processing resources.” Affect is also central and inseparable from human cognition; affective assessment is necessary to behavioral decisions (Damasio 1995). Even the “self” is an ongoing cognitive construction to account for the experiences of living (Damasio 2010). Developmental and social neuroscience have shown that the idea of a free and rational human underestimates the extent to which our sense of self is inhabited by our sense of others (Schore 2001, Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, Ravven 2013).

With regard to nonhuman animals, study after study has reported not only physical but psychological continuity, including tool making and use, reasoning and problem solving, cooperative and competitive social relations, communication, bonding, love, fear, rage, friendship, and grief. Penn (2011) has noted: “Hardly an issue of *Current Biology* or *Animal Cognition* goes by without some effigy of human cognitive uniqueness being torn down and dragged through the mud . . . from tool use to metacognition, from deception to death, much of comparative psychology over the past 35 years has been driven by the single-minded goal of demonstrating that nonhuman animals are capable of human-like cognition.” Penn contends that it is the preferential treatment and assumptions about human cognition that are especially problematic.

Mammalian neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (2012) makes a similar point about affective and motivational continuity between humans and other animals: “Why the weight of scientific evidence remains to be accepted by most neuroscientists is a cultural-historical issue, not a scientific one. By sharing a neural platform for diverse affective experiences, the core SELF can be considered to be a ‘nomothetic’ (universal) brain function.” Psychopathologies like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder have been found in nonhuman animals (Bradshaw et al. 2005). The *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* concludes that a preponderance of evidence supports continuity of consciousness between humans and other animals (Low 2012). Humanism and human exceptionalism, remnants of philosophy before the age of science, were embedded unquestioningly in much early science. But science is capable of self-correction. The more concise question regarding suicide might be why would we would *not* expect to find it in other animals.

In her book on animal grief, King (2013, 2016) relates a heart-breaking anecdote about a mother bear and her cub at the end of their lives on a bear farm in China. These farmed bears are kept horizontal in coffin-like cages for their entire lives, with a metal catheter inserted into their abdomens to harvest bile. They are allowed one unrestrained arm with which to feed themselves. It is a life so horrible that reports say the bears sometimes simply go mad and beat their heads against the bars of their cages until they die. On one mother bear, King (2013) reports: “The cub cried out in distress as a worker prepared to harvest his bile. The mother, distressed by her loved infant’s pain, broke free and squeezed the life out of her baby so that he would no longer suffer. Overcome by her own emotional pain, she ran, purposefully, headfirst into a wall, killing herself” (p. 117).

How are we to evaluate this reported event? Is it more objective to assume that this was merely an instance of blind affect, induced reflexively by stress and pain inflicted on a species that is intellectually and emotionally incapable of mercy-murder-suicide? The same types of immediate affective assessment may well be operative in an ursine and human mother under similar conditions. The role of affect in human behavior is at least as powerful as that of any potential for rational analysis or moral freedom. Hence the more urgent question may concern the ethics of subjecting any animal, human or nonhuman, to such levels of negative affect that they would engage in suicidal behavior.

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