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What is a “good death” for an animal?

Jocelyne Porcher, *Pour une Mort Digne des Animaux*. Introduction by Elisabeth de Fontenay. Paris: Éditions du Palais, 2014. 107 pp. € 14.50.



What is a “good death?” For the Vikings, it was to fall in battle and thereby to gain entrance to Valhalla. Perhaps their constant wars were not simply for plunder so much as the opportunity to be killed. For many Amerindian tribes of the Amazon, it was the opportunity to be ritually sacrificed to the deities after capture by opposing tribes, which, similarly, would mean an enhanced position in the next world. Captives would regularly be offered, and would decline, opportunities to escape (Castro). These were both societies in which life was always precarious, and death by what we call “old age” was very rare.

In Early Modern and Victorian Europe, the prevailing ideal was a peaceful death at home in bed, surrounded by family and friends. As death approached, a person would pay any debts, settle affairs, reconcile with adversaries, and then call relations to gather around, say parting words and finally, through an act of will, take leave of this world. People would meticulously plan the scene of their deaths, almost like a play, including which garments to wear and how to decorate the room. In contemporary times, comparatively little attention is paid to the moment of death. The prevailing expectation is that a person will die out of sight in a hospital or hospice, quite possibly alone. Everything possible will be done to ease physical pain. Reasonable, though probably not “heroic,” measures will be taken to prolong life. It is intended to be a comfortable but, in every sense, “sterile” environment, in which death itself becomes largely a clinical matter (Ariès).

And what is a “good death” for an animal? The examples that I have given barely hint at the variety of ways in which death is conceived among human cultures. Ways in which a death is marked include fasting, feasting, fights, laughter, drunkenness, self-mutilation, tears, or casually moving on to other things (Barley). While many animals may have some understanding of death, it seems reasonable to think that the variation among them must be vastly greater. Today, the idea of death by the teeth of a predator usually fills us with horror, but that may not be necessarily the case among animals in the wild. Even in cities, most human beings first learn of death through pets and other animals (Melson). The very concept of death is something that people and animals socially construct together, and have probably done so in every culture that has ever existed.

“Domestic” animals, share, to a degree, “human” culture. In traditional European peasant culture, it was customary to raise a pig almost as one of the family. It was fed scraps from the table, allowed to roam free, and, essentially, treated as a pet. When finally the time for slaughter came, it was granted a version of the prevailing idea of a good death for human beings, and all members of the family were expected to be present to take their leave (Pastoureau). The contemporary abattoir, as designed by Temple Grandin and others, is reminiscent, at least with respect to dying, of a hospital or hospice, carefully designed and regulated to be as clean and humane as possible. It may even have religious facilities, yet it has very little power to accommodate individuality. In the end, it is an institutionalization, and, therefore, at least a partial

denial, of the reality of death. Jocelyne Porcher's most fundamental objection to industrial farming is not simply that it is "inhumane." When heavily regulated, it might be humane, at least in the sense of preventing or minimizing the animals' pain. But even if that is the case an industrial abattoir still denies their individuality and, thereby, their dignity, as well as that of the farmers. When an animal is deprived of an individual death, its life loses significance as well.

One hears very little discussion today of death, its meaning, or, most especially, its significance in the context of a life. Jocelyne Porcher, in her book *Pour une Mort Digne des Animaux* (For a Death Worthy of Animals), is one of few authors to address it directly, and her work is likely to have implications for human beings that go far beyond animal husbandry, at least as narrowly understood. This is one area where human practices with regard to animals and human beings are very intimately connected. It is particularly difficult to separate the "interests" of animals and human beings, and it is not easy to avoid invoking some notion of distributed consciousness. Those who doubt that a very intimate, caring relationship may exist between farmers or herders and their animals should consider the many references in the Bible to the relations of shepherds to their flocks. Take for example, psalm 23, which, in the King James translation, begins: "The Lord is my shepherd. . . ."

Porcher is a leading advocate of smaller, traditional farms in France, and an intense critic of industrial farming. This book, like her other writings, is based on the assumption of a very intimate understanding between the animals and the farmer. Some may wonder if these relations are truly reciprocal, even whether they are real or imagined. Such questions are legitimate, but they may also be asked about virtually any possible bond between animals and human beings. One who keeps pets might, in a similar way, ask "Does my dog really love me?" One could also question whether animals truly allowed themselves to be taken by certain hunters, as the Plains Indians and many other indigenous societies have believed. Relations between keepers and their pets have been studied vastly more extensively than those between farmers and their animals, but questions such as these elude scientific investigation. In the end, farmers, like everyone else, must trust their intuition about relations with other species. On a daily basis, Porcher points out, relations between farmers and animals are reciprocal, since farm animals will at times refuse to cooperate if there is something that they do not like. But especially for those of us who are not farmers, these relations lead us into a mysterious world, based on perceptions for which we, in contemporary Western culture, do not even have an adequate conceptual framework or vocabulary.

To describe relationships between traditional farmers and their animals, Porcher invokes anthropologist Marcel Maus's concept of "the gift," rather than any theory of the "social contract." The farmer's gifts to the animals include a steady supply of food and protection from predators, while the gift of the animals to the farmer eventually include their lives. She emphasizes that the killing is not the purpose of the relationship, but it is necessary for the bond to exist at all. According to Porcher, the killing of animals is not only for economic reasons, but is also necessary because resources at the farm are only sufficient to support a limited number of animals. It is a very sad event. It is also an epiphany, revealing the rhythm of life and death, in all its tragic beauty.

On this point, as so many others, I am impressed by the similarity between farming, as she describes it, and contemporary pet-keeping. Both answer a human need for bestial companionship, but the pet-keeper generally addresses the danger of surplus population by means of birth control, as well as limiting contact with other animals. The advantage of that is that it allows the person to give animals greater individual attention and postpone the hour of their deaths. On the other hand, the status as a pet can deprive animals of much experience, both as infants and as parents. More generally, it takes away most contact by animals with other animals of their own, and different, species. While pet keeping generally brings animals, especially dogs, almost entirely into the human world, farming creates a realm for them between the natural world and our society, retaining both many advantages and problems of both. I strongly suspect that farmers relate to animals collectively, while pet keepers respond to them more as individuals, but that awaits confirmation by research.

Porcher's approach to the subject is practical, and only indirectly philosophical. The central problem she addresses is that farmers often lack the resources, expertise, and legal authority to take the lives of animals in the most humane way, yet the industrial abattoirs, which may kill painlessly, tend to be bureaucratic, disorienting, cumbersome, and impersonal. In the absence of local facilities, the major alternative is traveling abattoirs, which, because of their smaller size, can accommodate the sensitivities of individual farmers and their animals. Some farmers, for example, will wish to accompany their animals to the very end, while others will leave before their lives are taken. Their scale and flexibility enables travelling abattoirs to allow such choices.

Porcher never uses religious language or imagery. It is noteworthy that even the word “sacrifice” (the same in French as in English) is never employed in her book, though it is regularly used by many academic authors to designate the taking of animal life. It is possible that Porcher deliberately avoided the word, since, for some people, it still conjures Victorian images of bloody, barbaric rites. Nevertheless, the book has an unmistakable, if very unobtrusive, religious dimension. The killing of livestock becomes overlain with many social, cultural, personal, and philosophical meanings, to a point where even ostensibly pragmatic acts take on a ceremonial dimension.

Porcher’s conclusions may be controversial, but she deserves credit for courage to address a subject that has, up to now, been largely taboo. Although there has been a revival of traditional farming in recent decades (Kleppel), scholars still often assume that relations between farmers and their animals are purely utilitarian. Hopefully, her work may inspire some anthrozoologists to devote closer attention to these relations, as they have long done to those between humans and their pets.

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