

CONCEPTS OF PAIN AND THE EVOLUTION OF BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper defends against objections the widely accepted truism that pain is bad and therefore should be avoided or minimized. This truism seems to be in conflict with our attitudes towards, and treatment of, non-human animals. It may therefore have sweeping implications regarding our treatment of them.

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INTRODUCTION

I begin with what I will call “the truism”: pain is bad and therefore should be avoided or minimized.

While almost everyone would initially claim to subscribe to this truism, it appears to have sweeping implications that are quite at odds with most people’s behavior or beliefs. We live in a world that is characterized by vast amounts of preventable human suffering caused by war, poverty, and persecution. The resources devoted to one night’s high-end dining in any major European or American city could reduce the suffering of vast numbers of people in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Moreover, the production of food for one night’s high-end dining directly entails vast amounts of animal suffering. Foie gras is expensive for the ducks as well as for the humans. It appears that we would refrain from such excesses if we really subscribed to the truism.

One response would be to confess to practical irrationality. We sometimes fail to do what we have most reason to do, and this is an example. While practical irrationality is no doubt a fact about our lives, there is something strange about such a confession in this case. Practical irrationality is something to be avoided and deplored, not affirmed with a shrug of the shoulders. Imagine a man who both abuses his wife and believes that abuse is bad and should be avoided. Reflecting on his behavior he confesses to practical irrationality. At the very least we expect him to struggle to change his behavior. He should be in therapy, a support group, or perhaps even plead guilty to violating the law and go to jail. Regret and often remorse are proper responses to the confession of practical irrationality. Yet regret and remorse do not seem much

in evidence at Europe and America’s high-end restaurants. While most of us may claim to embrace the truism, we don’t seem willing to confess to practical irrationality. We seem to think that we can have the truism, and the foie gras too.

In what follows I will mainly be interested in cases in which the truism seems to conflict with our attitudes towards, and treatment of, non-human animals (henceforth often “animals”). I will explore four alternative strategies for maintaining that there is no plausible truism about pain and its avoidance that is inconsistent with our everyday treatment of animals.

FUZZ UP THE TRUISM

The first strategy is to fuzz up the truism. It is obvious that there is something right about this. Pain isn’t the only thing that is bad, and in concrete cases the good of pain reduction would have to be balanced against other goods. For example, suppose (not implausibly) that when painting the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo came home each night from work suffering from various aches and pains. Not many of us would say that Michelangelo should have given up painting the Chapel in order to avoid the pain. The value of Michelangelo’s creation outweighs whatever aches and pains he might have suffered in creating it. Of course it also matters to us that Michelangelo willingly painted the frescoes. If he were a suffering slave some people’s opinions about this case might shift (but not mine).

The fundamental point is this. No doubt there are various ways in which the truism should be fuzzed up. However, on most plausible revisions, it is still going to be a truism and it is still going to have implications

that are at odds with many of our ordinary beliefs and much of our everyday behavior. Getting the truism into philosophically respectable shape may help to dull the contradiction between the truism and our ordinary lives, but it will not remove it entirely. It is difficult to see how I could cheerfully chomp away on the foie gras while sincerely maintaining any plausible version of the truism.

LIMIT THE SCOPE OF THE TRUISM TO PAIN SUFFERED BY HUMANS

A second strategy is to limit the scope of the truism to pain suffered by humans. The basic intuition behind this may be the common view that we should apply a transpersonal discount rate to pain. On this view, the suffering of a stranger should be less important to me than the suffering of a friend, and the suffering of a friend ought to be less important to me than my own suffering. I believe that such a view has less going for it than one might think (see Parfit, 1984 for discussion), but even if it is God's own truth it does not directly support excluding altogether concerns about the suffering of non-human animals. What would be needed is a further argument to the conclusion that the pain of non-humans should be discounted away entirely.

Such a view seems to me to be just plain indefensible. If pain is bad and has implications for action, this cannot plausibly be said to depend on who experiences the pain. Imagine a surgeon who would want an anesthetic if he were to undergo an otherwise painful procedure, but denies it to a patient on the grounds that the patient's pain is not his pain. Of course it is open for someone to admit that the individual solipsism of the surgeon is irrational while trying to maintain that some version of species-solipsism is plausible.

Consider two versions of species-solipsism: "*Homo sapiens* species solipsism", and "indexical species-solipsism". *Homo sapiens* species solipsism holds that the truism applies only to pain suffered by humans; indexical species-solipsism holds that the truism applies only to pain suffered by the con-specifics of those who embrace the truism. *Homo sapiens* species-solipsism is implausible for many reasons, not least because it implies that highly sentient, advanced life forms in remote galaxies should only be concerned with human suffering, even if there is enormous suffering on their planet and they have no idea that Earth and its humans exist. Indexical species-solipsism is implausible for the same reasons that individual solipsism is implausible. If one believes the truism and grants that humans and some non-humans are alike in having pain, then it seems indefensible to say that the truism only applies to human pain. That pain should be avoided or minimized follows from its being pain, not from any taxonomical facts about who

has the pain. To suppose otherwise is like saying that sugar is sweet only when it is my sugar.

REJECT THE TRUISM

A third strategy is to reject the truism. This is the most radical strategy that I will consider, and it relies on a certain understanding of evolution for support. Here is one version of the argument. "Pain and pleasure seem to have nothing to do with good and evil if our appraisal is taken from the vantage point of ecological biology. Pain in particular is primarily information. In animals, it informs the central nervous system of stress, irritation, or trauma in outlying regions of the organism. The doctrine that life is the happier the freer it is from pain and that the happiest life conceivable is one in which there is continuous pleasure uninterrupted by pain is biologically preposterous. A living mammal which experienced no pain would be one which had a lethal dysfunction of the nervous system. The idea that pain is evil and ought to be minimized or eliminated is as primitive a notion as that of a tyrant who puts to death messengers bearing bad news on the supposition that his well-being and security is improved." (Callicott, 1989).

One point that should be made at the outset is that the correlation between sensations of pain and useful information is much weaker than one might think (Hardcastle, 1999). Those who suffer from phantom limb pain, chronic pain, and referred pain often suffer without tissue damage. On the other hand wounded soldiers, accident victims, and those who suffer from SIB (self-injurious behavior) often fail to have pain sensations despite serious physical damage. This suggests that evolutionary considerations, brought to bear in this way, are consistent with a version of the truism, one that focuses on unnecessary pain. Unnecessary pain is pain which does not provide useful information to an organism, either because it is not correlated with physical damage, or because the organism is unable to flee or resist the cause of the damage of which it is being made aware. It is obvious that much of the pain suffered by non-human animals as a result of human action is of exactly this type. The pain of the duck from which the foie gras is extracted is clearly unnecessary, on this understanding. It is still difficult to see how I can have the truism and the foie gras too.

However there is a more serious difficulty with this argument. What is presupposed here is that showing that something has a biological function defeats any claims about its value. But this presupposition conflates the descriptive question of why something came to be with the normative question of whether or not we should value it. Consider some examples. Several different accounts have been given of the function of so-

cial play (Bekoff and Byers, 1998). Surely it does not follow that if social play has a biological function, thus it is not good. Quite a bit of play is harmless fun, and that surely counts as something good. Similarly, there may be evolutionary explanations for rape and aggressive behavior, but the fact that there are such explanations in no way implies that these behaviors are not bad and should be avoided or minimized. This argument against the truism founders because it conflates (supposed) facts with values. Pain may have evolved to function as a messenger, but it still may be bad.

DENY THAT NON-HUMANS SUFFER PAIN

A fourth strategy is to deny that non-humans suffer pain. The truism applies to all creatures who suffer pain, but it happens that humans are the only such creatures. On the face of it this strategy, reminiscent of Descartes's denial of animal minds, may seem singularly unpromising. But it is not as absurd as it may seem.

It is becoming increasingly clear that our everyday concept of pain is at least troubled and perhaps incoherent. We think of pain as essentially a sensation, yet I may enjoy a respite from my headache without supposing that I have suffered from two distinct headaches. My headache was there all along but for a while I didn't feel the pain. Indeed, our very language suggests that pains are there to be felt, and so presumably not to be felt. Just as I may perceive or not perceive a tree, so I may feel or not feel a pain. This way of speaking suggests that the pain is an object of perception rather than an object whose essence is in being perceived. We often think of pain as being essentially bad, yet people sometimes report various drug experiences as not extinguishing the pain, but of making the sufferer care about it less or not at all. Drugs sometimes extinguish pains; other times they allow us to better tolerate them.

In the face of such conflicting intuitions philosophers have moved in different directions. Some have insisted that pain is essentially subjective, and tried to

explain away the conflicting intuitions. Others have insisted that pains are essentially objective and tried to bury subjectivist intuitions. Other philosophers have argued for complex relational views, and still others have insisted that there really is nothing that corresponds to our everyday notion of pain (see Hardcastle, 1999, p. 95 for discussion).

At this stage it is hard to be confident about what will turn out to be the best account of our pain intuitions, especially in light of the growing evidence that they are also quite culturally relative. But this dispute should not shake our confidence in the truism, nor lead us to question its widespread application. The feature of pain that undergirds the truism is the fact that pain hurts. Perhaps there are pains that do not hurt, in which case the truism may not apply to them. But many pains do hurt and these are bad and should be avoided or minimized. And as Broom (2000) has shown, there is every reason to believe that pains that hurt are widely distributed among various animals.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have defended a widely accepted truism that appears to be inconsistent with many of our everyday attitudes and practices regarding animals. There is quite a lot more to say on this subject. However, I hope enough has been said to make plausible the view that a simple, widely accepted truism about pain, may have sweeping implications regarding our treatment of non-human animals.

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