

Pain and suffering in non-human animals

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The 18th and 19th Century the philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously wrote of animals:

a full-grown horse or dog, is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?¹

Whether non-human animals can suffer and if so whether humans should be motivated by their suffering are questions which have concerned philosophers for thousands of years. The 17th Century Enlightenment philosopher, René Descartes, argued that because non-human animals lack the capacity for language and cannot reason they are little more than unthinking machines. Descartes has become somewhat infamous for performing a variety of vivisections on animals, but he acted in the belief that the appearance of pain in non-human animals is just that – an appearance. Much like a robot programmed to flinch or make a noise when its body is damaged, animals exhibit behaviour that looks like pain but is not accompanied by any mental processes or feeling of pain. Whilst his conclusion will seem very strange to most people today, similar views continue to be expressed.

Further back, in ancient Greece, thinkers such as Porphyry and Plutarch claimed that animals, unlike plants, can feel pain and experience

emotions such as fear. In a book length letter, aimed at convincing his friend Firmis to return to vegetarianism², Porphyry argued that this was one of many reasons why humans should not eat other animals. In contrast, the Stoic school of philosophy held that because animals lack language and reason they have no affinity or kinship with human beings and are owed nothing. Porphyry responded that the ability to communicate and reason in a rudimentary way is not only present in non-human animals, but that certain animals possess these capacities to a higher degree than some humans do. This line of argument, comparing the capacities of animals with humans such as infants or those with severe cognitive disabilities, has since been used many times and has become known to philosophers as the argument from marginal cases.

Porphyry and Descartes both ask whether it is true that non-human animals can feel pain, and they each come to different conclusions. But what reason might we have for thinking that only humans can feel pain? Before we can answer this we need to understand what it is that we mean when we use the term pain. Pain can be thought of as having two components. The first is a physiological response to noxious stimuli and it is one we see all across the animal kingdom. The physiological pain response is known as nociception. The second component to pain is the psychological aspect – the feeling of pain. When persons suffer pain they not only flinch away from the

source of that pain, but they experience an unpleasant feeling at the same time. Whether animals other than humans experience the accompanying unpleasant feeling of pain is the subject of some disagreement amongst both scientists and philosophers. The mainstream view is that certainly vertebrates, and one species of octopus, can feel pain. There has even been some recent research suggesting certain species of fish may also experience the feeling of pain³.

Note that there is a distinction between pain and suffering. In general terms suffering is a catch-all concept that encompasses the unwanted negative content of a range of unpleasant emotions, feelings and sensations such as: fear, anguish, despair, hunger, loss, confusion, humiliation, misery and so forth. Pain can be experienced without suffering or harm being caused (for example if you pay to have your ear pierced the momentary pain of piercing is unlikely to lead to you suffering as a result). Whilst pain can cause suffering, suffering can be caused without pain (you could be terrified by threats). And suffering can also be caused indirectly: if something or someone dear to you is harmed then you can be caused to suffer as a result. Suffering also tends to be associated with more than minimal levels of unwanted negative sensations or feelings (these might be sustained and/or intense sensations or feelings)⁴. The experience of suffering, in this respect, is quite similar to the mental state of distress, which is an inability to cope with, or adapt to, negative feelings or sensations. Suffering therefore accompanies great pain or distress, but is not the same thing as either of those two concepts.

Whether animals can feel pain and suffer is a question of how animal minds work and whether they are conscious and sentient. Some people think that the the kind of subjective or experiential consciousness (known as phenomenal consciousness) that allows for the feeling of pain requires self-consciousness⁵. Self-consciousness is the ability to have thoughts about thoughts. For example, when you think to yourself how cold you are, or you wish you didn't desire that bar of chocolate, or think that the existence of some fact means that a belief that you hold may be false. If feeling pain requires self-consciousness then most animals, although

probably not all, will not be able to feel pain (dolphins and great apes might be the exceptions). However, the idea that phenomenal consciousness requires self-reflective thought is controversial and generally dismissed.

Others argue that suffering requires the ability to reflect upon experience (in other words to be self-conscious). If this is true then most animals, even if they can feel pain, cannot be said to suffer as a result. One response to this view is to argue that if a being cannot rationalise or articulate pain; consent to it; or understand that it might be in its interests, then there might be reason to think that the experience of pain could, in some circumstances, be more unpleasant or harmful for that being. For example, when we make a trip to the dentist for a painful but necessary procedure we may well suffer during the procedure, and our dread beforehand might make us suffer then too; we might even suffer afterwards as we recall the experience. But, the procedure is chosen and we are able to understand that the suffering we experience is in our interests and that it is a good thing – and our expectations and memories will be tempered by these facts. For an animal there is no such understanding – there is merely the experience and memory of a painful and inexplicable event. One of the reasons pain can be experienced without suffering as a result is because persons can choose to experience pain and understand that it is in their interests to do so. Persons can also judge that pain may only be momentary in a way that an animal cannot. They can make a rational calculation about overall benefits and harms brought about by a particular noxious stimulus. Thus, a person might choose to become frightened by a viewing a horror film, but for a child unable to understand and conceptualise such a film, viewing it would be a traumatic affair. Rather than suffering solely resulting from the loss of the ability to ascribe meaning to experiences, it may be that it also results from the absence of such abilities. To say that suffering requires self-consciousness or even reason, language, or personhood appears somewhat arbitrary. It should also be noted that if the ability to think about feeling, or to ascribe meaning to experience, or to be rational, or possess language is necessary for suffering, then

it would be wrong to say that young children, or humans with certain mental disabilities or illnesses can feel pain or suffer.

But separating phenomenal consciousness from self-consciousness, and concluding that self-consciousness is not necessary for suffering doesn't mean that non-human animals can feel pain or suffer, because animals might not possess phenomenal consciousness either. Finding out whether non-human animals have an experiential existence is not an easy task, and some think it might be an impossible one. However, there is general agreement that if non-human animals can have phenomenal consciousness then it is most likely to be present in vertebrate species. One reason for thinking that animals do possess phenomenal consciousness is that many animals exhibit the same kind of behaviour in response to physical harm that we do. Furthermore, humans and vertebrates share similarly structured brains and neural systems. In addition, the purpose for which the response to pain has evolved appears to be the same in us as it is in animals. However, those three facts are no guarantee that humans experience the same mental states as other animals when in pain. The problem is that trying to understand what goes on internally in the mind of another being is so difficult that concluding either way is problematic. The philosopher Thomas Nagel has argued however that just because we do not know what it is like to be an animal, does not mean that there isn't something that can be described as what it is like to be that animal⁶. It certainly seems likely that many kinds of animals other than humans can feel pain, and it is perhaps best to err on the side of caution.

However, it is very likely that non-human animals do not feel pain or suffer in exactly the same way as most human persons. And it is likely that varies according to the physical and mental complexity of the animal. Pain and suffering may well be more unpleasant or harmful in some circumstances for human persons than they are for other animals. But it would be a mistake to conclude that experiencing pain in a different way or to a lesser degree is the same as not experiencing it at all. As Porphyrys wrote to Firmis:

...it does not follow, if we have more intelligence than other animals, that on this account they are to be deprived of intelligence; as neither must it be said, that partridges do not fly, because hawks fly higher...⁷

Of course, concluding that some non-human animals can feel pain and/or suffer does not necessarily mean that we should treat them well – that would require a further argument. But on the other hand, it would also be a mistake to conclude that the capacity to feel pain or to suffer is the only reason that persons have to treat others well. Other reasons might include personal relationships, notions of respectful treatment, shared vulnerability, or the recognition that animals are valuable for their own sake and not just because they are useful to humans. If the only reason to treat another being well is if they can feel pain or suffer, then arguing that non-human animals lack the capacity to suffer also leads to the conclusion that neither can babies, infants, and people with severe dementia or other cognitive disability and the further conclusion that we do not have reason to treat them well either. Few of us doubt that young children can suffer, and few of us doubt that we should treat them well, whether they are children we love as our own, or those of unknown distant strangers. The intuitive feeling of disquiet accompanying the conclusion that infants might not be able to suffer or feel pain and that therefore our reasons to treat them well are lessened should at least give cause to examine how we treat other animals.

FURTHER READING

Andrews, Kristin, "Animal Cognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/cognition-animal/>

REFERENCES

¹ Jermey Bentham, *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation* (Printed for W. Pickering, 1823), 236.

² Porphyry, *On the Abstinence of Eating Flesh*, trans. Thomas Taylor, 1823.

³ Victoria Braithwaite, *Do fish feel pain?*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ David DeGrazia and Andrew Rowan, "Pain, suffering, and anxiety in animals and humans," *Theoretical Medicine* 12, no. 3 (September 1991): 193-211.

⁵ Peter Carruthers, *The Animals Issue: moral theory in practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chap. 8.

⁶ Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 1974): 435-450.

⁷ Porphyry, *On the Abstinence of Eating Flesh*, bk. III para 8.