

I feel your pain: do humans and animals suffer similarly?

September 2011

[**Dr Stuart Derbyshire**](#) and [**Professor Anthony Jones**](#) will try to untangle the uniqueness and commonality of pain and suffering for humans and animals.



The suggestion of animal pain assumes an important level of equivalence between the psychological experience and biological development of animals and humans. These assumptions require critical assessment. Although there is biological similarity across the animal kingdom including shared nerve fibres that carry sensory information and trigger defensive reactions and comparable brain regions and hormonal stress responses, considerable biological differences between humans and animals remain manifold. To put it bluntly, the brains of all animals are underdeveloped compared to human brains and most neuroscientists believe that brain development has an important and necessary relationship with experience. Clearly for some, and maybe for all animals, pain experience can be rejected because they simply do not have the brains for it.

More provocatively, however, subjective experience, including pain, cannot be directly inferred from biological measures because such measures do not account for the contents of experience in general, and of pain in particular. To understand pain experience there is a necessity to examine the psychology of pain. Pain, as experienced by conscious human beings, is a subjective experience with content. That content is embedded in a symbolic system of language that animals have no access to. Thus pain is not merely incompatible with the biology of animals, pain is incompatible with the cognitive and emotional development of animals. There are, therefore, good reasons to reject any equivalence of human and animal pain experience.

There is, however, a perhaps understandable disquiet in denying animals any form of pain or suffering. It is difficult to reject the idea that an animal writhing in apparent pain is not in actual pain - something like pain appears to be shared. There is, possibly, a useful distinction between being in pain and knowing that I am in pain. Both animals and humans might be said to be in a state of pain but only humans can experience that they are in pain and explicitly share their condition with others as an acknowledged fact of being. This distinction between being and knowledge feels like a distinction that can work but, as we will explore, it does not work in the way expected because sheer being can only be lived and not experienced.

Some background readings

[Jeff McMahan's podcast on Vegetarianism](#), on Philosophy Bites and relevant for the moral considerations at stake

[Human use of animals](#), with Peter Singer on Philosophy Bites

[The capacity of animals to experience pain, distress and suffering](#), Chapter 4 of 'The ethics of research involving animals', Nuffield Council on BioEthics

[Morality of Using Animals](#), debate between philosopher's Jan Narveson and Gary Francione, The Abolitionist Approach

[Should apes have rights](#), video of Battle of Ideas 2010 session on WORLbytes site

[In defence of animal experimentation](#), by Patrick Hayes, spiked online 22 June 2011

[Nature and nurture, then and now](#), Timandra Harkness, Culture Wars 30 June 2011

[Animals don't have morality, people do](#), by Helene Guldberg, spiked review of books June

2011

[Pain and suffering in non-human animals](#) , by Steve Cooke, opinion piece July 2011

[Man is more than an overdeveloped monkey?](#) , by Tim Black, spiked review of books Aug 2011

[Knock out one gene to knock out chronic pain](#) , by Jessica Hamzelou, New Scientist 09 September 2011

Listen again (variable quality)...

Speakers on pain and suffering - click on the Play button: {mp3}pain-suffering-speakers-intro{/mp3}

Initial discussion and replies - click on the Play button: {mp3}pain-suffering-discussion-initial{/mp3}

Further discussion and replies - click on the Play button: {mp3}pain-suffering-discussion-concluding{/mp3}

...and sorry but that's where the recording cut out.

Click on photo for write-up from an attendee at the event



[My first visit to @manchestersalon...painless](#), Write-up by Darren Jenkinson (@psyc_social),
Psyc_Social Blog 30 September 2011

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