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Understanding Pain in Non-Human Animals: a Critical Exploration of Arguements

Jessica L. Sitko
Trent University

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RUNNING HEAD: Understanding Pain in Animals

Understanding Pain in Non-Human Animals:
a Critical Exploration of Arguments

Abstract

This essay contains a critical analysis of common understandings of pain in animals and challenges common arguments for the presence of phenomenological pain sensations in non-human animals. I will argue that (i) pain behaviours are neither necessary nor sufficient for pain sensations, (ii) the presence of nerve structures in non-human animals which are similar to that of humans are not sufficient for pain sensations, (iii) we cannot rely on similarities between human and non-human experiences of pain to argue for the presence of pain sensations in animals, *unless* we think that animals are self-conscious in the same way that humans are. In addition to this, possible moral implications of denying sensory pains in animals are discussed, as well as considering what animal pain experiences might be like *if* we reject the common understanding of animal pain; these considerations appeal to the arguments made by Peter Carruthers, who suggests an answer as to what non-human animals might experience in lieu of a sensory or phenomenological experience of pain. Though this analysis of animal pain is inconclusive as to the question of the existence of animal pains, it suggests that the likelihood of phenomenological pain sensations in non-human animals is low. Further, its goal is to demonstrate to the reader that our common understandings of and arguments for pain experiences in animals are not as sound as we may be inclined to think. Some caveats regarding the implications of accepting this argument are offered, and demonstrate that we need to abandon our empathetic inclinations towards these creatures in order to accept this conclusion.

Understanding Pain in Non-Human Animals: a Critical Exploration of Arguments

As humans, we are quite aware that phenomenological pain sensations exist, as we experience them almost daily. It is obvious to us that a stubbed toe or a sliced finger has a painful feeling associated with the bodily damage; that is, we feel “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (Murat, 2013) We do not question our own ability to feel pain, and most often we don’t question this ability in other humans, because not only do they display pain behaviours of aversion or discomfort, (a facial display of pain, the common exclamation of “Ouch!” or other expletives) but they are also able to verbally describe their individual pain experience. On the other hand, it is not quite as obvious that non-human animals share the same phenomenological sensations of pain that humans do. That is to say, we cannot be sure that bodily damage has the same *feeling* of pain in animals that we experience as humans. While it is tempting to imagine that animals have the same types of painful sensations associated with bodily harm that humans do, based solely on the animal’s ability to display apparent pain-behaviours, I would like to argue that there are many other considerations to be taken into account before coming to this conclusion. If we hope to critically evaluate this claim, we must also ask: what constitutes a pain sensation, and makes it possible? What are the ways in which we (humans) feel pains, and do these qualities apply to non-humans animals? And lastly, is consciousness necessary for phenomenological pain sensations?

The first step that must be taken to further understand the possibility of pain in non-human animals, is the acknowledgement that a display of pain behaviour is neither necessary nor sufficient for the experiencing of pain sensations. Two useful examples of this come from Hilary Putnam; the logical possibilities of the “super stoic” and the “perfect pretender”. In the case of

the super stoic, we imagine a person who has phenomenological pain sensations, but fails to produce any pain behaviour associated with these feelings. (Ravenscroft, 2005) In a more applied case, we can think of times when not displaying visual cues of pain experience may be required; for example, receiving a bee sting is rather painful and would usually produce pain behaviours, but we may choose not to make a display of the pain felt when at a wedding, because it would not be appropriate to cry out or change facial expressions. In this case, though pain is felt, there is no pain behaviour to accompany it, demonstrating that pain displays are not necessary for being in the conscious mental state of pain. In the case of the perfect pretender, Putnam imagines a person who feels no pain but is very adept at imitating the pain behaviours of others so that they are very convincing in their ability to appear to be in pain. (Ravenscroft, 2005) To illustrate this, one may refer to some soccer players who “dive” during games and emerge clutching a limb; that is, they appear to be injured in order to make it appear as though a foul has been committed. The players are not in a state of pain and yet are very good at convincing those around them that they have been injured. Based on this example, it can be concluded that pain behaviours are not sufficient for the experience of pain sensations. So, when enquiring into the possibility of pain sensations in animals we cannot draw the conclusion that they do experience conscious pain sensations based exclusively on their ability to display pain behaviours, since pain behaviours are neither necessary nor sufficient for pain sensations.

When considering the capacity for animals to experience conscious pain sensations, another common suggestion appeals to the animal’s biology; they have nerve structures that send signals to the brain as humans do, therefore, they must also have some sensory experience when they are touched. However, why should we think that nerve sensors throughout the body that send information to the brain would have the capacity to translate that information into a

phenomenological pain experience? Pain perceptions and sensations are often mistaken for a phenomenon called nociception. Nociception, simply put, is the body's ability to sense noxious stimuli. (Allen & Trestman, 2015) This involves the nerve endings detecting sensory information and sending it to the brain in order to alert it to the body's condition and surroundings. However, the ability of the body to send signals of damage, danger, or alternatively, of safety and pleasure, does not suggest that any phenomenological feeling would necessarily accompany these signals. For example, a deer being attacked by some predator, is alerted that the body is undergoing damage by the nerves; the nerves pick up sensory information of claws digging into skin, and send this information of damage to the brain, which then triggers the flight response to remove the deer from the danger. Similarly, a cat who purrs when stroked, only does so because the signals sent to the brain convey that this is a safe situation and physically relaxes the animal. In both cases, the animal does not necessarily have any *feeling* associated with the nerve signals, it is simply disposed to seek safety and avoid bodily damage. Allen and Trestman suggest that the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) is particularly important in this regard for mammals. This section of the brain picks up sensory signals and produces the behavioural response that we so commonly see in animals: the fight or flight response. However, the ACC is not present in non-mammals such as fish which may suggest that they may not be as adept as mammals in their detection of bodily damage, which would explain their diminished aversive behaviours. (Allen & Trestman, 2015) Based on the evidence provided by nociception, showing that nerves sending signals to the brain does not always give rise to a sensory experience, it seems that we cannot appeal to the presence of nerve structures in non-human animals as evidence of phenomenological pain sensations.

When inquiring into the question of whether animals can feel pain, we often refer back to our own pain experiences, which can be helpful in drawing distinctions in some instances. However, we need to be cautious when relying on similarities between our own experiences and those of non-human animals when attempting to answer the question of whether or not animals feel pain. It is easy to establish and accepted that humans can experience pain sensations, and this is not a particularly interesting philosophical question, as we all experience pain almost daily. However, it seems that these phenomenological sensations are possible only when humans are in a natural state of consciousness. That is to say, when we are able to recognize ourselves as being the subject of our experiences, in which a particular mental state is conscious rather than having body systems that are conscious as a whole. For instance, in a deep sleep, we are not conscious of our surroundings, have no self-awareness and are unable to feel any bodily pains or sensations. Minor disturbances such as an itch on the nose do not feel like anything to us, but a response (itching the nose) may still take place non-consciously. More intense sensations or pains however, must take place consciously, which is why we are awakened into consciousness when, for example, your pet cat bites your toes. Similarly, humans do not experience painful sensations when under the effects of anesthesia, because the drug disconnects the body from pathways in the brain which normally give rise to the phenomenological pain sensations of the mind. (Humphries, 2011) Even in cases of anesthesia that leaves the patient fully “awake” yet unable to feel pain, such as in the case of epidurals given to mothers during childbirth, the patient is not then in a natural state of consciousness, but an altered one in which certain brain functions and neural pathways have been shut down to prevent the body from sensing pain. In both of these cases, it seems that consciousness is necessary for human pain sensations. So, if humans, who undoubtedly experience pain sensations cannot have these experiences without the

necessary condition of consciousness, why then, would we expect animals to be capable of these pain sensations if they themselves are not conscious? This, of course, is assuming the generally accepted conclusion that while animals have mental states (they can have thoughts about their immediate environments), they do not have conscious mental states; that is, they cannot have higher order thoughts, and most of them are not conscious in the sense of having a concept of self. If this is the case, it seems that animals, like humans, would be incapable of feeling pain if they were not in a natural state of consciousness. Additionally, if it is the case that non-human animals also must have self-conscious awareness to experience pain sensations, it may be that the animal experience of pain is analogous to patients under anaesthetic (the nerve signals sent to the brain do not produce any painful sensation). So, when considering the question of animal pain perceptions, if calling upon the similarities between humans and non-human animals in terms of biological bodily response, we must accept that if consciousness is necessary for phenomenological pains in humans, it must also be so in non-human animals. Therefore, we cannot rely on similarities between human and animal experiences of pain, *unless* we think that animals are self-conscious in the same way that humans are.

If it is the case that non-human animals do not have phenomenological sensations of pain, we are left to ask the question as to what their experience would be like. Carruthers' answer to this question is that perhaps animals do have bodily pains and experiences, but that these pains do not feel like anything to them; they are non-conscious pain experiences. Carruthers argues that non-conscious experiences are quite common, and as humans we can have these types of experiences; instances where our bodies go through the motions, but we fail to become aware that we are participating in the experience. This can be illustrated through Carruthers' example of washing dishes while listening to a particularly enjoyable piece of music. It is easy to become so

transfixed on the pleasure of the musical experience that we become unaware of the dish washing experience, and as a result are surprised when the song ends, to see that the dishes are clean. In this example, we have had the experience of washing the dishes, but it didn't feel like anything to us as it was a non-conscious experience. (Carruthers, 1989)

This example may be comparable to an animal's experience of pain; it is a non-conscious experience, meaning there is no feeling or awareness of the experience, but it is still an experience none the less. This argument is strengthened by the similarities found in blindsight patients; that is, people who have lost conscious awareness of a portion of their visual field. Though these patients have no awareness of the information received from one section of their visual field, they are very successful at identifying and even picking up objects within that area, even though they have not consciously seen anything there. Carruthers argues that these people are having non-conscious experiences of the objects in their visual field, in which information about the experience is "made available for integration into actions, [but is] not available to conscious thought." (Carruthers, 1989) This is to say that the blindsight patient is able to put the information received non-consciously into practice by picking up the ball, but is not aware of having seen the ball. Similarly, a non-human animal is able to react to an injury through avoidance of the cause of the pain, but the pain does not feel like anything to the animal because it is not conscious of having felt it. Therefore, the animal's experience of the physical damage has no phenomenal properties. This can also be understood through the experience of split brain patients who have had their Corpus Callosum severed, rendering the brain as two separate hemispheres with no communication between the two. In these cases the left-brain is clearly conscious and able to communicate, while the right brain cannot communicate. In the case of the split brain patient it is commonly concluded that the right brain acts as "an automaton lacking in

conscious awareness.” (Block, 1997) From this case we may draw a similar conclusion for the experiences of animals; they are like non-conscious automata which have experiences but are not conscious of them, and so participation in these experiences doesn’t feel like anything to them.

After examining arguments concerning the capability of animals to feel pain, we are left with an important practical consideration: if non-human animals do not feel pain, how should this affect our actions towards them? Carruthers argues that since their pains do not have phenomenological qualities and do not feel like anything to them, rationally and logically speaking, we should have no moral obligation regarding causing pain in non-human animals. However, while cutting off a dog’s leg may not cause it any pain, the dog will have a much more difficult time getting around, finding food etc. and therefore, we likely have some moral obligation to not cause other living things undo harm, even if the harm caused is not painful, because it results in a lower quality of life with added challenges for the animal. (Carruthers, 1989) It can be seen that, at the very least, animals in physically threatening situations display pain behaviours that demonstrate being in a state of distress, whether they are consciously experiencing pain sensations or not. Because animals (like humans) are predisposed to avoid physical damage to the body, it would be wrong to cause damage to these creatures, regardless of being able to prove their experience of conscious pain perceptions and phenomenological sensations. Additionally, it should be noted that a major shift has occurred in veterinary practice in which practitioners now widely use anesthetics during animal operations under the premise that they feel pain, which was certainly not the case prior to this shift. (Allen & Trestman, 2015)

To conclude, I would like to assert that it is unclear at this time whether or not non-human animals have phenomenological experiences of pain; and if some do, which ones we can attribute phenomenological pains to remains unclear as well. Due to the uncertainty surrounding

this issue, we should also continue to challenge our assumptions and think critically about the reasons why we might hold the strong intuition that non-human animals feel and experience pain in the same way we do. However, in light of the many doubts we may have surrounding this question, it would seem unjust and immoral to treat these creatures as if they didn't feel pain.

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