

Who is able to feel pain? A Cartesian attack on the bête-machine

Many philosophers deny that animals can feel pain, because in order to do so, they argue, animals would need to share our concept of pain, which they obviously do not: someone is taken to share our concept of pain only if she refers to her pain experiences and that of others in the same way as we do. On the face of it, this argument looks counterintuitive. Is the capacity for pain not a matter of how our bodies are designed rather than a matter of how we use language? Do we not need to look at a creature's nervous system instead of its conceptual capacity to determine what it can and cannot sense? In this essay I will defend these intuitions by showing that the need to discriminate real pain from hallucinated pain clearly refers us to the body as the material basis of pain.

A challenge to this rather commonsensical understanding of what is needed for a creature to be able to feel pain has been provided by Descartes' theory of the bête machine. As the standard reading of Descartes goes, an animal is nothing but a very sophisticated machine: it is composed of various mechanisms that more or less automatically lead to a certain behavioural output if stimulated in this or that way. And although Descartes may admit that the animal machine is more complex than, let's say a clock or even a dishwasher, he nevertheless believes that the animal is a machine that, as it has traditionally been claimed, lacks awareness of what is going on inside of its tubes, pores and fibres. The reason that is usually cited for this interpretation is that, according to Descartes, animals don't have minds, while conscious awareness of bodily phenomena, such as pain, is taken to require a mind that is attached to the machine in question.

We can here see that the question of whether or not someone is able to feel pain is closely related to the question of whether or not someone has a mind, because it is the mind that is claimed to provide the awareness needed for someone to take notice of the fact that harm is being done to the lump of matter that constitutes her body. If our mind were absent, the argument goes, those occurrences we usually experience and interpret as pains would amount to mere dysfunctions within the mechanics of the body.

Once we make the move and accept that some sort of mental awareness, or more generally put, a mind, is needed for someone to be able to feel pain, we understand why the ability to speak has often been cited as the litmus test for the attribution of mind, and hence for the attribution of the capacity for pain. Descartes is a proponent of this test; in a letter to Henry More he writes: “It has never been observed that any brute animal has attained the perfection of using real speech, that is to say, of indicating by word or sign something relating to thought alone and not to natural impulse. Such speech is the only certain sign of thought hidden in a body.”¹ The point here seems to be that another person’s mind is something we cannot experience the way we experience that someone has large feet. According to Descartes, the mind is hidden and can merely be indicated by certain signs, of which the clearest is someone’s ability to use language in an intelligent way.²

The problem with this approach, of course, is that it is too restrictive. If the ability to feel pain is taken to go hand in hand with the ability to speak, because speech is the sign that proves that the creature in question has a mind, and hence is aware of her bodily phenomena, animals and small children must be denied sentience. To claim this, however, is not only entirely counterintuitive, it also presents our practice of attributing pain to what Crispin Wright calls the “conceptually innocent” unintelligible:

What goes missing on the resultant view is any role for empathy or projection in the range of broadly evaluative responses – sympathy, outrage, sadistic satisfaction, delight, etc. – which we have towards the suffering or pleasure of the conceptually innocent. Events and states whose occurrence makes no conceptual demands on their “owner” cannot be understood on the model of events and states which essentially go with *thought*. So it seems that such broadly evaluative responses become groundless, or even unintelligible: where do we look for a satisfactory conception of what is bad about the suffering on an animal or an infant per se if its state cannot be conceived by analogy with the awful thing that we sometimes *experience*, and if what is awful about the latter depends essentially on its being experienced *as* awful, as falling under that concept?³

Some philosophers have tried to help this problem by claiming, as McDowell does, that the conceptually innocent do feel pain. Their lack of our concept of pain would merely prevent them from feeling pain the way *we* feel pain when we experience, for instance, headaches as headaches or stomach ache as stomach ache.⁴ The underlying assumption here seems to be that creatures can experience something *as* something only to the extent that they possess a concept in virtue of which they can represent the experience they are having. For instance, I cannot experience snow as having a certain shade of white if I lack the concept of this particular shade: it would only look white to me, whereas for those with a more refined concept of white, the experience of the very same patch of snow would present itself in a different light. And the same presumably goes for pain: if we have a certain concept of pain we experience pain as something specific. Those having a different concept of pain (or none) may therefore still experience something, just not the same thing as we do when we conceptualize an experience in accordance with *our* concept of pain.

How convincing is this approach? In the remainder of the paper I will once more refer to Descartes in order to show that the overemphasis on language and conceptual capacities is mistaken when it comes to answering the question of who can feel pain. I will first draw on Descartes' famous dream argument, before emphasising that Descartes distinguishes between the capacity for thought and the capacity for sentience. I will suggest that if we respect this distinction we can see that it is wrong not only to tie the attribution of mind to someone's ability to speak intelligently, but also to think that sentience cannot be achieved by creatures who lack a Cartesian mind, which is the mind that enables creatures to form rational thoughts. I will thus advocate a concept of mind based on a creature's bodily dispositions to feel rather than on a creature's putative rationality.

If we compare animals to humans and claim that they do not experience pain the way we do, and on the basis of *this* deny them the ability to feel pain, we make a claim about what counts as real pain as opposed to what does not: we claim that those who do not share our concept of pain may feel something, but they do not feel pain, at least not what we understand by "pain". Another way of discriminating between real pain and mistaken pain comes into sight if we go along with Descartes and suppose for one moment that everything we take to experience under ordinary conditions is part of an endless dream as long as it cannot be proved that we are not dreaming, but are awake and experience reality. Given this setup, it turns out that someone's ability to use language intelligently tells us little about whether or not she has a mind and can feel pain. This is because all experiences to which speakers in our pretended dream refer with sentences of the sort "I am in pain" are performances that cannot be known to be the performances of real people. It could well be the case that it is only a bad trick of my dreaming mind that I think that there are real people who are capable of using the concept of pain the way I

do and that, in fact, there are no real people at all. This possibility, however, needs to be ruled out, because if it cannot be known whether there are real people it cannot be known whether there are real pains as opposed to imagined pains either.

At first sight this thought experiment may look farfetched. This impression, however, changes if we consider that the dream argument helps us to understand that pain is something that we tend to identify by looking at the body and its dysfunctions rather than by determining whether the person we perceive as being in pain shows all the signs of being in possession of our concept of pain. So, what comes under scrutiny is not so much the question of whether or not there are real people in a real world as opposed to fictitious characters in an eternal dream. The point rather is that our understanding of what real pain is relates to something other than the use of language: it relates to something that is going on within the body, because in cases where one cannot be sure whether a body exists, and grounds the assumption that someone is in pain, it is hard to speak of real pain experiences.

One may here object that hypochondriacs really do feel pain, although there is nothing wrong with their bodies, which seems to show that events happening at a bodily level are less important to the question of who is able to feel pain. However, if we reflect on the position of the dreamer herself, and not only the question of how dreamers can know whether those in their social surroundings, that is, other people starring in the supposed dream, are suffering from pain, we can see that the example of the hypochondriac only reinforces the point made. Vivid as dreamt pain experiences can be, they do not qualify as real: they are dream experiences and remain so, if our body, that is, the body that is safely located in our bed, remains intact and does not show the symptoms our dream body exhibits. Descartes writes: "Often when we sleep, and sometimes even when we are awake, we imagine certain things so vividly that we think we see

them before us, or feel them in our body, although they are not there at all.” (CSM, I, 338, 26)

The dream argument thus shows that the mind alone is insufficient to produce an experience that can be qualified as real pain. Disembodied minds, such as the Cartesian dreaming mind, cannot feel real pain. They need the body to provide the material basis for this pain. Hypochondriacs are in a somewhat similar position as dreamers. Their bodies are supposedly intact, but they feel pains as if their bodies were affected by the disease in question. They thus possess vivid pain experiences that, for want of a material basis, do not qualify as real pains. Of course, it may well be that this material basis actually exists (perhaps in places where doctors did not look for it, such as the brain)⁵ and that they only remains undetected. If this is the case, the hypochondriac’s experience of pain turns into real pain.

Considerations about types of experiences, that is, dream experiences and real experiences, have shown that sentience is something that requires a body. The question that remains to be answered now is whether the body alone is able to sense, that is, the body which is not attached to what Descartes calls the soul, and which is often equated with the mind. Descartes himself seems to think that this is indeed possible, because for him it is clear that the mind first and foremost enables creatures to think rationally, and this is taken to be the reason for which humans endowed with a mind have thought and language, while animals are taken to lack them. Descartes writes to More: “Please note that I am speaking of thought and not of life or sensation. I do not deny life to animals, since I regard it as consisting simply in the heat of the heart; and I do not even deny sensation, in so far as it depends on a bodily organ.” (CSMK, 366) But how can something that lacks a mind have awareness of any kind? John Cottingham argues that we can find two different forms of consciousness in Descartes and that a Cartesian mind is required only for the self-reflective awareness human beings have of themselves and their

sensations, while bare awareness of bodily phenomena can be found even in animals that are denied a Cartesian mind.⁶ If this is right, and I think it is,⁷ it holds that animals devoid of souls are deprived merely of *self-reflective* awareness of sensations, such as pain, hunger, and thirst, while they cannot be denied to have *some sort* of awareness of these processes taking place within their bodies.⁸ Note that in focussing on these two types of consciousness one approaches McDowell's position: one grants that animals feel some sort of pain, because one accepts that they have some sort of awareness, without stipulating that this experience is exactly like ours.

If one chooses this perspective one may be in a position to argue that Cartesian animals are sentient. To render it a plausible position, however, one still needs to answer how it is possible to deny tables and chairs pain experiences, although, strictly speaking, these pieces of furniture qualify as much as mindless things as animals. A Cartesian answer to this question is that life and sensation require that the machine in question be composed of certain organs (CMSK 365), such as, a heart, tubes and fibres, which enable the most rarefied particles of the blood – the so-called animal spirits - to travel the machine in such a way that they create hunger, thirst, pain and pleasure.⁹ Obviously, tables and chairs neither possess organs nor animal spirits and therefore cannot feel pain.¹⁰

Conclusion:

The capacity for language and intelligent thought has often been considered crucial to our ability to discriminate between sentient and insentient creatures. Thus the fact that someone uses the concept of pain the way we do has been taken to indicate the presence of a mind that is able to feel pain the way we do. A closer look at our understanding of what counts as real, and not merely dreamt or hallucinated pain, has shown that there are ground for arguing that pain is something we relate to its material basis within the body. By acknowledging this, we ceased

treating the question of who can feel pain as a variant of the question of who has a mind, and in particular, a Cartesian mind, which is conceived as the locus of rational thought. In a certain sense we thus separated the capacity for rational thought from the capacity for sentience; and we did so by operating with a conception of consciousness that can be attributed to bodies that lack the capacity for rational thought. Note that if we treat this rudimentary form of consciousness as something mental, we gain a concept of mind that embraces the body and its functions and does not separate the mind from its material underpinnings the way Cartesians did when they claimed that the mind is an immaterial substance essentially different from matter. As a consequence, mind can be attributed to every being that shows signs of sentience. And this certainly has important ethical implications, because sentient creatures are treated as beings that are of the same kind as human beings.

¹ Rene Descartes (1991), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III*, trans. J. Cottingham et al, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 366. Passages taken from this book are referred to by CSM volume and page number or CMSK and page number.

² Descartes denies that animals that have been trained to speak are capable of thought. According to him, the capacity for intelligent language presupposes that the creature in question is inventive of language: “We must not confuse speech with the natural movements which express passions and which can be imitated by machines as well as by animals. Nor should we think, like someone of the ancients, that the beasts speak, although we do not understand their language.” (CSM, I, 140)

³ Crispin Wright (2002), “Postscript to ‘Human Nature?’: Criticism of McDowell’s Concept of Experience”, in Nicholas H. Smith, *Reading McDowell*, New York: Routledge, pp. 164-65.

⁴ John McDowell (1998), “Reply to Commentators”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58(2), p. 429.

⁵ Descartes is a proponent of the view that pains are in the brain. See his discussion on phantom limbs in Descartes to Plempius for Fromondus, 3 October 1637 (CMSK 64).

⁶ John Cottingham (2005), “Descartes Treatment of Animals”, in J. Cottingham (ed.) *Descartes*, 225-233, p. 232; see Stephen Gaukroger (1997), *Descartes. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford Clarendon Press, p. 285-288 for details on the cognitive side of animal representation.

⁷ I provide more reasons for the claim that Cartesian animals are aware of their sensations in my “Descartes’ Dreaming Bodies” (in preparation)

⁸ The more traditional view, according to which, Descartes held that “there is nothing going on in beasts that isn’t observable physiologically, objectively, from the outside, nothing that it’s ‘like’ to be” is put forward by Margaret Wilson in her (1999) “Animal Ideas” in *Ideas and Mechanism. Essays on Early Modern Philosophy*, Princeton: University Press, by Bernard Williams in his (1978), *Descartes*, Penguin: London, p. 282, and by Jonathan Bennett in his (1988), “Thoughtful Brutes, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 62, 197-210.

⁹ According to Descartes, animal bodies perform the same things our bodies perform when we feel hunger, disgust, or fear. The difference is that the human mind, that is, the rational soul, usually represents these bodily movements in a way that is foreign to animals (To Plempius, CMSK 62). Descartes writes: “Passions are present in the [animals] too, though in them they serve to maintain and strengthen only the movements of the nerves and the muscles that usually accompany the passions and not, as in us, the passions themselves.” (CSM, I, 348) More generally put one can say that sensations have the function of initiating actions that strengthen the animal body, as much as human sensations (and passions) have the function

of strengthening the human body. If so, animals can be granted to experience fear as fear precisely to the extent needed in order to make their body move away from the source of danger, because this is what strengthens rather than endangers their survival.

¹⁰ The implication of this is that animals with organs different from our own have sensations that are different from ours. And this is claimed to be so even if we lack the ability to think of what it is like to be a bat. For a version of this argument see Thomas Nagel (1979) "What it's like to be a bat?" in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press for an elaboration on this question.