

PAINISM DEFENDED

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In a previous essay (in THINK 21), Richard Ryder argued against Utilitarianism's aggregation of pains across individuals. He continues this argument and rebuts several criticisms of his moral theory of painism. Painism not only rejects the aggregation of pains across individuals, it also questions the trade-off of pains against pleasures.

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I welcome the recent critique of my moral theory of painism by Joost Leuven and Tatjana Visak and thank them for their positive comments.¹ These authors first outline painism and then examine my analysis of Utilitarianism. In painism I argue that the only *prima facie* wrong is the causing of unconsented to pain (very broadly defined as any negative feeling) to another individual, regardless of species.²

Painism tries to rectify the faults present in both Utilitarianism and Rights Theory (see Ryder, *Painism versus Utilitarianism*, THINK 21 Vol. 8, Spring 2008, 85–91) and Leuven and Visak concentrate upon what they see as my two criticisms of Utilitarianism viz: (i) the 'critique of Singer's use of the word "sentience"', and (ii) the 'critique of Utilitarian aggregation as not taking account of the metaphysical separateness of persons'.

On the first point, I have never criticised Peter Singer for using the word 'sentience' because we agree on this. As they point out, Singer uses this word 'as a synonym for the capacity to feel pain'. My criticism of the word is as a psychologist. I want to isolate what is important (i.e. the capacity to feel pain) from all the other meanings of *sentience*. Take, for example,

Chambers' current definitions of sentient as being 'able to feel' and 'capable of sensation'.

Arguably being 'able to feel' covers all feelings including emotions such as anger, joy and love. Sensations will include awareness of warmth, movement, pressure and sexual pleasure. Until about 1990 I was using the word *sentientism* to describe my moral theory but then decided to shake off all these connotations in order to concentrate upon the one morally important ingredient of sentience which is, as Singer and I agree, the capacity to feel pain. Calling my theory *painism* is not a criticism of Peter Singer at all, it merely helps us to concentrate upon the moral centrality of pain.

As regards Leuven and Visak's second point, my criticism of Utilitarianism as regards its aggregation of the pains and pleasures of separate individuals is, however, crucial. I have articulated this criticism for at least forty years and can remember doing so with Peter Singer when he first visited my home outside Oxford in 1971. He was visiting in order to hear about my idea of speciesism.

I think the standard Utilitarian aggregation of pains and pleasures across individuals is wrong for the following four interconnected reasons:-

- 1) The awareness of pain cannot pass across the boundaries between individuals. We can only directly experience our own pains. Individuals are separate. (In the event of a new technology being developed that allows a cable or other connection to transmit pains between two or more brains, then it is conceivable that I might be able to experience your pains directly in addition to my own. Under such circumstances it might be allowable to aggregate your pains and mine. But such technology does not yet exist.)
- 2) If A feels 5 units of pain and B feels 2 units then the total is said by Utilitarians to be 7

units of pain. But no-one feels this total, and 'feeling' is an essential part of the definition of a pain so *no pain of 7 units exists* in this case. Pain is a feeling and it makes no sense to say that a pain is unfelt. An unfelt pain is not a pain. Thus the aggregation or total of the pains of A and B, not being felt by any individual, are not a pain. Singer agrees that 'if a pain is not *experienced* then there is no pain'.

- 3) We do not aggregate feelings such as surprises, sexual arousals, loves or angers, across individuals, so why do Utilitarians do it with feelings of pain? If I was to say Melanie's surprise was 10 units, Barbara's was 3 units and Susie's was 7 units, people would look at me suspiciously, and if I then said this meant an aggregate of surprise of 20 units, then they would definitely think I was crazy! It is meaningless. Why, then, do it with feelings of pain? You cannot meaningfully say that Fiona's 5 units of love, added to Bob's 7 units of love makes a love-aggregate of 12 units. It is also nonsense to say that France's aggregate anger in 1914 was 7503 units or that Germany's was 8715!
- 4) As moralists we are, surely, concerned with real pains and not with abstract pains. Totals of separate pains are pains in the abstract, while an individual's pain is real – all too real! (Incidentally, painism has this especially strong foundation – the all too real experience of individual pain. This seems to me to be a firmer foundation than the foundations of most other moral theories.)

My main criticism of Utilitarianism is that it tries to aggregate pains (and pleasures) across individuals. This means that it can condone or encourage appalling actions such as gang rape where the total of the rapists' pleasures outweigh the suffering of the victim. The more usual example of

this embarrassing situation is of an amphitheatre where the (sadistic) pleasures of a thousand spectators outweigh, and, therefore, permit, the agony of a victim who is being baited to death. Such a theory can easily condone state torture. In as much as Utilitarianism underlies democracy it encourages the view that majorities in general matter more than minorities, because *a large number of individuals will tend to produce a greater total of pain or pleasure than a smaller group*. In extreme cases it says that the agony of the few is justified by the mere convenience of the many. The larger the majority the more it is felt to be right. Painism rejects all this. For painists the agony of an individual matters far more than the mild sufferings (or pleasures) of a million. Painism respects individuals.

One can indeed add up feelings of love, surprise, anger, and even pain, across individuals *theoretically*. But you are then left with a total that means nothing. If you have P with 30 units of pain and Q with 20 units of pain, then saying the total pain is 50 units is meaningless. The most meaningful way to rate the situation morally is by the level of pain experienced by the *maximum sufferer* – so the above situation is valued at 30 units of pain, not 50 units. Painism is against *aggregations* across individuals, although it allows trade-offs of pains, but between *individuals only*.

History

Leuven and Visak wrongly assert that my ideas about painism were derived from various other philosophers. They were not. I thought this position out for myself in the 1950s and 1960s. As a Cambridge psychologist I never read much philosophy, and certainly not Taurek, nor Rousseau, nor Rawls (who writes so unclearly that, in my view, he should not be taken too seriously). I did try to read Rawls during the 1990s but the two former writers I have never read, to this day.

Being concerned about causing pain is nothing new, and goes back to Buddha, Porphyry and a host of writers from

at least the seventeenth century onwards.³ People have been slow to realise, however, that all the other bad things such as injustice, lack of liberty or lack of equality, are bad only in as much as they cause pain.

Pleasure and Pain

Painism, as its name suggests, emphasises a concern for pain rather than pleasure. Yet Utilitarianism, in its search for happiness, postulates that pleasures can be traded off against pains. If both pleasures and pains are on the same dimension this might be true, in as much as pleasures can, as it were, be treated as negative pains, and pains as negative pleasures. But I think this is probably wrong. I accept that every stimulus experienced is either pleasurable or painful overall. Each experience may be composed of a mixture of mini pains and mini pleasures, within the same individual, which *can* legitimately balance each other out so that the experience is, on balance, either an overall pain or an overall pleasure. But, as a general rule, pleasure does not justify causing pain to others. What I am trying to say is that pain and pleasure are somewhat different. They are not just negatives of each other. Each involves some different brain structures. Furthermore, pain is always bad more intensely than pleasure is good. We want to avoid being tortured more than we seek to experience ecstasy.

Pleasure and Happiness

What, then, is the relationship, psychologically, between pleasure and happiness? (This is an important question morally as both Painism and Utilitarianism claim, ultimately, to be looking for happiness.) Psychologically, it is surely true that the experience of pleasures tends to create happiness. Pleasures are, usually, of a shorter duration than happiness and can include purely sensory events. For

example, warmth, perfume, the taste of chocolate, are experienced as pleasures. Pleasures are usually linked closely to specific experiences of external events. Happiness, on the other hand, is a more general, a more internal, and a more lasting condition. In my view it is definitely a mood state, involving the activation of some different areas of the brain from pleasures, as well as alterations in dopamine and serotonin levels.

The Implications of Painism

I have written several books trying to explore the implications of my theory (see notes) so I am grateful to Leuven and Visak for continuing this search. They have tried to find consequences that embarrass my theory. I do not think they have succeeded. They do not seem to have read my most recent book⁴ nor my chapters on *speciesism* and *painism* in Ruth Chadwick's recent excellent *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (2nd Edition)⁵ which would have helped them. Nevertheless, they give three interesting examples of what they think are 'counterintuitive implications' of my theory:

- 1) Painism, when faced with the choice of either rescuing an individual in great pain (e.g. with a broken leg) or a million people in lesser pain (e.g. with broken arms), would choose to rescue the maximum sufferer. This is correct. Painism does, indeed, suggest this and, yes, it is counterintuitive. For some reason most humans are 'numbers mad' (perhaps due to our military instincts). We habitually argue that a battle or accident that slightly injures a thousand people is 'worse' than a battle or accident that affects only one or two individuals, even if it causes them agony. I say this is wrong. We should be concerned with the *intensity* of each individual's pain and not

with the *quantity of individuals affected*. The badness of an event is determined by the intensity of pain of the maximum sufferer.

- 2) Painism does not permit the infliction of pain on one individual in order to cause 'bliss' to many. Again, this is correct because I do not accept that bliss (pleasure) ever justifies the deliberate infliction of involuntary pain on another individual (this is essentially the gang rape situation). I think pain and pleasure are psychologically and morally separate. (See above.) Inflicting pain on A to reduce the *pain* of B, on the other hand, may, sometimes, be permitted.

Leuven and Visak are changing *both* variables (the number of individuals as well as the degree of pleasure) to maximise my embarrassment! The worst possible case against painism might be to ask – 'Would you prevent the infliction of even a tiny twinge of pain on one individual if it would cause extreme pleasure for all sentient creatures?' Other than saying that such a situation is hardly likely to arise, this is one reason why I have stipulated that we can only cause pain to A in order to reduce *pain* to B. Furthermore, this is only permitted if three conditions are met:

- (i) there is no less painful alternative action that will achieve the same result
- (ii) B's pain is severe,
and
- (iii) A's pain is *not* severe.⁶

This means that painists can cause non-severe pain to A in order to reduce the severe pain of B. Utilitarians, on the other hand, are far more cavalier, and would allow torture in order to get pleasure for many.

- 3) Leuven and Visak finally score, I think, with their third highly unlikely example. They say I

cannot distinguish between the merits of rescuing one person from a sinking boat or rescuing ten people. 'According to Ryder, there is no reason to save the greater number, no matter how great that number would be.' Yes, this is true,. However, I can reduce my embarrassment a little by saying first, that the more victims there are the greater will be the probability of a really painful death occurring. Secondly, painism would also be considering the effects on friends and relatives. The larger the number of drowned victims, the greater the number of bereaved and so the greater the chance, therefore, of some extremely painful bereavement reactions. So the greater the number of victims, the greater becomes the probability of extreme pain among the sufferers. This raises the whole problem of predicting future events, where I stipulate that probability has to be built into moral calculations – highly probable events carrying a greater weight than less probable ones.

(By the way, Leuven and Visak make a mistake in saying that 'according to Ryder dying prematurely is bad because (and in as far as) it deprives beings of future welfare'. No, I do not believe this, although some Utilitarians do. I reject it on similar grounds to my reasons for rejecting aggregated pains.)

Conclusions

I do not think that painism has suffered badly from Leuven's and Visak's analysis. Applying the same sorts of arguments, Utilitarianism suffers far more than does painism. I still feel that painism is an exciting new moral theory that combines the virtues of Rights Theory (e.g. the respect for individuals) with the strengths of Utilitarianism

(e.g. the emphasis upon pain, pleasure and happiness), plus continuing the attack upon the absurd and pre-Darwinian prejudice of speciesism. (The *degree of pain* is what matters morally, not who suffers it.) It also deals with conflicts of rights by promoting whichever right is associated with the most pain-reduction or avoidance.

When applied to politics, painism asks searching questions about democracy (although generally approving it) and attacks democracy's 'tyranny by the majority'. We certainly need a new and unifying secular moral theory, and painism is probably what we are looking for.

Dr Richard D. Ryder studied Experimental Psychology at Cambridge University where he obtained his MA and PhD. He invented the terms 'speciesism' (1970) and 'painism' (1990), and has been Chairman of the RSPCA Council. He worked as a psychologist in Oxford and was Mellon Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Tulane University. richarddryder@btinternet.com.

Notes

¹ Joost Leuven and Tatjana Visak, 'Ryder's Painism and his Criticism of Utilitarianism', *J. Agric. Environmental Ethics*, 23 February, 2012. online.

² Richard D. Ryder: *Speciesism Painism and Happiness : A Morality for the Twenty-First Century* (Imprint Academic, 2011), and *Painism and Speciesism in The Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, 2nd Edition, (ed.) Ruth Chadwick (Academic Press, 2012).

³ Richard D. Ryder: *Animal Revolution : Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism*, Basil Blackwell, 1989.

⁴ Richard D. Ryder: *Speciesism Painism and Happiness : A Morality for the Twenty-First Century* (Imprint Academic, 2011).

⁵ *The Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, 2nd Edition, (ed.) Ruth Chadwick (Academic Press, 2012).

⁶ Richard D. Ryder: *Painism – Historical and Ethical Aspects*, Symposium on *The Science and Philosophy of Pain* (Vlaams Diergeneeskundig Tijdschrift, 2000), 69, 401–406