



PHIL 848F

SEMINAR IN ETHICS:

PAIN & SUFFERING

Main topic

- ▶ This is a seminar in moral psychology rather than ethics per se, though it's relevant to ethics, as I point out on the syllabus.
- ▶ I want to do some readings on pain from recent literature in philosophy of mind and cognitive science.
- ▶ Most of these involve discussion of cases where one feels pain *without* suffering – i.e. without feeling bad, or discomfort – as induced by surgery or certain drugs considered “dissociatives.”
- ▶ So the normal experience of “unpleasant pain” apparently requires explanation – that some authors, known as “evaluativists,” have tried to provide by adding an *evaluation* of the pain sensations (which themselves are sometimes interpreted as evaluative).

Readings

- ▶ I first encountered this literature after a student in my emotions seminar passed an to me an article by Carruthers, arguing that an evaluativist view explains what psychologists call “valence”: the positive/negative aspect of states like pleasure/pain, but also including typical emotions.
- ▶ I’ve posted that article under “course materials” on my website, but it turns out there’s lots of earlier literature that’s relevant, so we might start earlier, with a piece that’s used to support a criticism of evaluativism that we’ll read later.
- ▶ The various articles listed under “course materials” on my website should lead us to further sources – and you’re welcome to add to the list as well, perhaps by doing a search on the subject.

Exploring (1)



- ▶ I'd like to run this as a genuine seminar, since I'll essentially be exploring this literature myself – despite already referring to it in a paper I just finished.
- ▶ We can take turns leading discussion of the readings. I'll do the one by Hall, which is a good introduction to the relevant issues. Take a look at the other articles and be ready to volunteer for one (or more) of them next time.
- ▶ I'm particularly interested in this subject because I've had the experience of pain without discomfort myself, under nitrous oxide in a dentist's office. As it turns out, so has Hall.

Exploring (2)

- ▶ Besides the reading assignments I'll also ask students to hunt down certain articles or ideas that come up in our readings, or in connection with them.
- ▶ For Hall, what caught my eye were the references to the original papers he cites (going back to 1959) reporting cases of pain without discomfort. At least take a look at (some of) them, and collect any that seem interesting, for next week.
- ▶ Other topics that occurred to me while thinking about Hall will come up as I proceed (e.g., "dissociation"). He also discusses some fascinating side-issues, such as the fact that fentanyl (currently the most reviled opioid) apparently involves unpleasant feelings without pain – the opposite of what he's mainly arguing for. Details would be interesting.

Requirements



- ▶ The only written requirement of the course is a term paper, on some specific topic related to the course and/or to your likely dissertations.
- ▶ We'll do presentations on paper plans later in the course, so you can get some feedback. I can't read several drafts of the full paper, but you can submit something like a proposal, for the class to discuss.
- ▶ Grades will be determined largely by the paper – and you're limited to a short-term Incomplete, e.g. two weeks or so – with a significant boost for class participation, including leading some of our further readings, plus the kind of exploratory research I've started to suggest.

Summary of tasks for next time



- ▶ Besides reading Hall, I'd like you to hunt down and convey to us
 - ▶ the original sources Hall cites for pain without discomfort
 - ▶ further articles on pain and/or dissociation (or drugs classed as dissociatives) that look relevant.
- ▶ I've only now consulted the article from the Stanford Encyclopedia (by a former grad student here, Murat Aydede). It's quite intricate, and I've so far just sampled it, but if you're energetic, or good at scanning, try reading enough to convey its main lines.

Some further tasks

- ▶ It might also be useful to get Aydede's anthology from the library (or, better yet, some digital source, if you have access to one).
 - ▶ His Stanford piece is drawn from it, but the book may contain other pieces of interest. I'd particularly like to find (there or elsewhere) a more accessible article by Tye to replace or supplement the next reading listed (so far) under "course materials" on my website.
 - ▶ The Stanford piece has already led me to what may be an "evaluativist" article even earlier than Hall, by Norton Nelkin in 1986. See if this would be interesting to include. Cf. also the Bain/Brady "Pain Project."
- ▶ I also have a Kindle version of a book by Grahek (with an introduction by Dennett) from 2001 that discusses dissociation and looks very interesting. You don't need a Kindle to read it.

Hall's view

- ▶ Hall's article is apparently an early attempt to make sense of pain without discomfort (= unpleasantness) – though I've since found something even earlier.
- ▶ However, Hall's suggested account may or may not be evaluativist. It's based on our "dislike" of the sensations involved in pain, since they're causally associated with perception of bodily damage.
- ▶ [Dislike may fit into the category of desire/aversion rather than representing pain as bad, though Hall's language sometimes suggests the latter. According to Aydede a later (2008) article is evaluativist. But a later article by Brady (2015) apparently builds on Hall's argument in opposing evaluativism with desire-based view.]

Analyzing perception

- ▶ Hall takes a perception (e.,g. of pain) to involve a propositional content as well as a sensation. [He seems to be working in part from ordinary language locutions: "hearing that...", "seeing that...", etc.]

" ...[A]lthough the sensations of the various sense modalities are completely different from one another, their propositional content often overlaps. Thus you can both see and hear that a train is coming, you can both see and smell that there is smoke in the room, etc. The sensations are completely different in these cases, but the propositional content is the same (or at any rate overlaps)."

- ▶ But it's the sensation, along with our reaction to it, that he's concerned with here.

Nociceptors

- ▶ According to Hall we have a sense that tells us specifically about damage occurring to our bodies, via receptors located in the skin and bodily tissue.
- ▶ These are referred to by physiologists as "nociceptors" (from the Latin '*nocere*', to injure or harm).
 - ▶ "Pain-blind" people, born without receptors, often are unaware of bodily damage, to their detriment.
 - ▶ Conversely, there are people who suffer "illusions" of bodily damage, with receptors alerting them when there isn't any.

Disliking pain

- ▶ But the unpleasantness of pain requires a further element: dislike.
 - ▶ "The dislike of a pain sensation is a separate mental state, separate, that is, from the sensation."
 - ▶ Pain is disliked because of its causal association with the badness of bodily damage.
- ▶ [See esp. p. 653 for talk that makes dislike sound like an evaluation of the sensation as bad.]

Cases and arguments

- ▶ In Section III Hall brings up cases where one experiences pain without disliking it [though not the one that's usually cited today (and labeled 'asymbolia'), namely anterior cingulotomy for chronic pain or in reaction to drugs labeled "dissociatives"].
- ▶ Instead, he mentions prefrontal lobotomy, plus morphine – and his own experience with nitrous oxide in a dentist's office.
- ▶ He also gives two arguments in support of his view: from privileged access and from the best explanation. [I've suggested another one in my recent paper: dissociation. The drugs in question are classed as dissociatives." cf. Grahek, Dennett.]

Variations



- ▶ Hall also has an interesting discussion of cultural influences on pain [or, really, how unpleasant it is, though he seems just to speak of pain at this point; cf. pp. 654f.].
 - ▶ Cf. parents' reactions to child's pain as influencing how much he dislikes it.
 - ▶ "...[V]oluntarily accepting a painful experience vs. being forced to undergo it...affects the degree of unpleasantness experienced...."
- ▶ Such variations show that the amount of unpleasantness associated with nociception is not determined simply by the physical stimulus being suffered, but rather is open to influence by cognitive factors.

Anomalies

- ▶ Pain is sometimes less unpleasant when a person who's suffering bodily damage views it as positive good; cf. cases of injury in war.
- ▶ But there are cases where one feels [unpleasant] pain despite knowing that no bodily damage is occurring; cf., e.g., a continual loud ringing in the ears. Even if you know it 's just an illusion, it intrudes on consciousness, though it may not be inherently unpleasant
- ▶ There also are cases where one views bodily damage as a positive good but still feels [unpleasant] pain, e.g. the dentist's drilling. Here Hall apparently just suggests that dental damage seems less good to us than injuries in war [?].

[Two issues:

- ▶ There are two questions in play here, though Hall's focus is the second:
 1. What does pain amount to?
 2. What makes pain unpleasant in normal cases?

- ▶ For Hall, the answer to 1 is given by the combination of propositional content with a sensation of bodily damage, and the answer to 2 is given by "dislike."]