

PAINISM VERSUS UTILITARIANISM

Richard D. Ryder

Richard Ryder, one of the founding fathers of the modern animal rights movement, here explains his latest thinking about morality.

When I created the term *speciesism* in 1970 I wanted to see the sufferings of other species included within the usual moral circle. Moral discrimination based upon species seemed to me to be as crazy as moral discrimination based upon race, gender, age, size or any other physical difference. For me, suffering is the central issue in ethics, and if something can suffer pain or distress then it deserves moral consideration, and it does not matter if it happens to be big or small, has hair or no hair, or is pink or purple. So X amount of pain in a dog or a duckbilled platypus matters exactly the same as X amount of pain in a human.

As far as I could see in 1970 the best moral theory available was Utilitarianism, so I proposed extending this theory to animals of other species, as well as, theoretically, to sentient robots and aliens, i.e. to all suffering things. Utilitarianism broadly proposes that an action is right if it produces greater overall happiness through reducing pains and increasing pleasures. The great Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham said our moral aim should be 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. He included within this calculation not only the intensity and duration of the pains and pleasures, but the *quantity of individuals* (including nonhuman animals) having these experiences.

The young Peter Singer got in touch with me in Oxford in 1971. He liked my published idea of speciesism and we discussed it on many occasions. He deserves the credit for popularising it in his Utilitarian classic *Animal Liberation* (1975). He actually invited me to be co-author of this book

but I declined because I felt I was too busy campaigning for animals. But I remember complaining to Singer about Bentham's insistence that the quantity of individuals be taken into account. Surely, if the rightness of an action was to be calculated by *totalling* the pains and pleasures of all those individuals affected by it then it could lead to absurd results. Take the case, for example, of a gang-rape where the pleasures of the rapists add up to more than the suffering of the victim. Utilitarianism appears to approve this. Does this mean that we all ought to be gang rapists? I could not get a satisfactory reply from Singer on this point.

This remains a central problem for ethics and for society. Is it right to assume that we can add up the pains and pleasures of separate individuals when calculating right or wrong actions? I know we do so daily in, for example, rating a war that wounds a thousand people as being worse than one that wounds only a hundred. But is this valid? Is it correct to add up the pains of a thousand individuals and to compare this total of pain with the total pains of a hundred individuals? Can subjective experiences like pain, that are experienced only by each individual, be correctly totalled in this way? (Note that 'pain' as I use the word, covers all forms of suffering.)

Let us consider another example: suppose twenty policemen who are trying to find a burglar, seize his daughter aged ten. Are they morally entitled to torture the child to find out where her father is hiding? If she tells them her father's whereabouts they can arrest him and all go home to their families for an enjoyable weekend. If they do not arrest the burglar they are going to have to continue working over the weekend, causing each of them some inconvenience. However, suppose if the average suffering of each policeman caused by missing their free weekend is 10 units, and the pain of the tortured child is 100 units then, according to Utilitarianism, they appear to be justified in torturing the child. The collective total of the policemen's suffering is $20 \times 10 = 200$ units, and this total is twice the suffering of the tortured child! In fact this model is the basis for democracy where the

wishes or welfare of the majority are taken, as a matter of principle, to outweigh the wishes or welfare of the minority (or individual). This is the downside to democracy – the so-called ‘tyranny by the majority’, where we sometimes rate the convenience of the many above the agony of the few.

I dispute the rightness of this. So twenty years ago I formulated my own ethical theory (painism) which aims to get around this important problem. Briefly, what *painism* proposes is this:

the pains and pleasures of each sentient individual are calculated, but they *cannot be totalled across individuals*. So it may be justifiable to cause or tolerate mild pain for one *individual* in order to reduce the greater pain of another *individual*, but it is never permissible to add up the pains or pleasures of several individuals in such calculations. A better way to rate the badness of a situation, I have suggested, is by the quantity of pain experienced by the most affected sufferer. *The suffering of each individual really means something, whereas totals of sufferings across individuals are meaningless.*

Some people can see this point immediately but others simply cannot grasp it. I am still trying to convince my friend Peter Singer! He ‘entirely accepts’, so he says, the statement: ‘if a pain is not *experienced* then there is no pain’ but he will not agree with painism. I argue that:

A feels her pain a

B feels his pain b

But no-one feels a + b

Thus a + b is meaningless

Singer replies: ‘I don’t have to claim that anyone feels a + b. But I do claim that a + b is worse than a’. (Singer, pers. comm. July, 2007)

Well, for me, this is treating pains as if they are material things such as apples or pears, which they clearly are not. Take the case of other subjective feelings: we do not attach much importance to adding up all the feelings of anger or love experienced by a group of individuals, and proclaiming the total of these loves or angers as being highly significant. So why do we, as Utilitarians, routinely do this with the feelings of pain and pleasure? Are we God-like in being able to feel the pains of all individuals?

Surely, pain, to be pain, has to be experienced, and no-one experiences the 'added-up' totals of pains that Utilitarians play with, so such totals are invalid. Certainly, several different individuals have felt these separate pains, but the total of their pains has never been experienced by the same person. Yet Singer still asserts: 'You can add up feelings of anger, love or pain, across a number of individuals and reach a meaningful total' (Singer, pers. comm. July, 2007). Well, I admit, technically you can add them up. But does this really *mean* anything, and are such totals a valid foundation for ethics? One can, for instance, utter the words: 'I have added up Bob's feeling of surprise with Jennifer's, and the total of their surprises is less than the totalled surprises of Kit, Bunty and Hermione'. But if I said this, people would surely think I was mad!

Consciousness does not cross the boundary between one individual and another. I can only feel my own feelings and you can only feel yours. The pains of others are merely the *reports* of pain. So unless our brains were to be connected by a cable using a futuristic technology not yet invented, I cannot validly say I directly experience your feelings as well as mine. Saying 'a hundred people feel a pain' is a slipshod use of language to describe a hundred separate experiences of pain. These are parallel experiences; they are not 'in series', to use an electrical analogy, so they cannot properly be added up. The actual *experiencing* of pain is a necessary and intrinsic part of the definition of 'pain'. A total of pain across individuals is fictional; its components are felt by a hundred separate individuals, but the total itself is not

experienced by anyone. Does it matter whether a pain score has been felt by one individual or, piecemeal, by many? I think it does. Singer appears indifferent.

Large quantities of sufferers matter to Utilitarians because adding up all their little pains can produce huge totals. We are probably programmed neurally to attach importance to large numbers of others (e.g. as allies or enemies) so we tend to do the same with victims. But this is what I call a system error; the machinery of the brain is chugging along oblivious to changed circumstances – victims are not in the same category as allies or enemies. Adding up the *strengths* of allies or enemies makes sense but adding up the *feelings* of victims does not. We need to remember that it **is the individual who actually experiences pain**, never the gene nor the herd nor the species per se.

Anyway, the upshot of painism is this. It avoids the sort of difficulties faced by Utilitarians when considering the gang-rape, tyranny by the majority, and police torture cases. **For painists each individual matters supremely.** *We are concerned with the intensity of suffering of each individual and not with how many sufferers there are.* The implications of the theory are quite considerable and I have tried to examine these elsewhere (see references). **Painism also helps sort out Rights Theory.** Indeed, it can join up the two great theories of Utilitarianism and Rights Theory to produce a unified ethical theory. I know painism is a bit counter-intuitive for some people, but I believe it is a small step forward for ethics. Maybe it can even help us in the twenty-first century to find the robust secular ethical theory we so clearly need.

Which matters most – stopping the mild discomfort of ten people, or the agony of one? If you think the latter, you could be a painist!

Dr. Richard Ryder is a psychologist and ethicist who was Mellon Professor at Tulane University. He is author of Putting Morality Back into Politics, (Imprint Academic, 2006) and Painism: A Modern Morality, (Opengate Press, 2001).